

# PROGNOSIS: FOREVER

ETIENNE



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*Dreamspinner Press*

Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
4760 Preston Road  
Suite 244-149  
Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Prognosis: Forever  
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<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-737-5

Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition  
March 2011

eBook edition available  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-738-2

To Marco and Dani

wherever you are.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A GREAT many people have helped make this story what it is today, including several beta readers who pointed out inconsistencies and asked all the right questions. My thanks to all of you.

My thanks again to Silvano Stagni for setting me straight on all things Italian.

Credit is also due to a retired doctor and a not-quite-retired nurse who served as beta readers in addition to critiquing all things medical in this book. Thank you, Bill and Ben.

I must also thank my patient and long-suffering editor Jim Kennedy, who has guided me through the maze that is correct punctuation.

Then there is my partner of fifteen years, who is also my best and most thorough critic.

Thank you again, one and all.

Etienne



## CHAPTER 1

---

### *Marco*

“WAKE up, Marco. Wake up,” someone was saying over and over again.

I fought my way up through layers of sleep, part of me wanting to respond to the urgent voice, but the part of me that didn’t want to do so won the battle and once again I succumbed to sleep.

“Come on, babe, this isn’t like you.”

“Go away,” I heard myself saying, “and leave me alone, I wanta sleep some more.”

“Marco d’Argenzio, get your ass out of that bed right now, or I’ll take steps. You’re attending a birthday party for your children in a couple of hours.”

“You attend it,” I said, “I’m gonna stay here in bed.”

“Okay, babe, you asked for it.”

There was blessed silence for a time; then something cold and liquid hit me in the face, and I sat bolt upright, shaking the water out of my face and hair.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I said.

“Taking steps, just like I promised.”

“I was gonna get up.”

“In this lifetime?” he said.

“In a bit.”

“No, you weren’t. You made that quite clear. What’s the matter with you, anyhow? You’ve always been an early riser, and not only that, you

usually wake up and hop out of bed ready for the day.”

“Everybody’s allowed to backslide once in a while, aren’t they?” I said.

“Backslide, yes, but this was more like a landslide.”

“That should be allowed too.”

“Maybe, but not on your sons’ birthday. The triplets are three today, and we’ve got a party to attend.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Here, drink this, maybe it’ll get your juices flowing.”

A cup of steaming coffee was placed in my hand. “Crawl back into this bed for a few minutes, and I’ll get both of our juices flowing.”

“No time for that right now. What’s the matter with you, anyway? Are you sick?”

I had a flashback to the night before. “Oh, shit, now I remember.”

“Remember what?” he said.

“You went to sleep last night, but I tossed and turned for a bit. More than a bit—quite a long time, actually.”

“Really,” Dani said, suddenly very serious, “that’s totally out of character for you.”

“Yeah. Anyway, I got up, pulled on a robe, went to the den, and had a couple of snifters of brandy.”

“And?”

“I crawled back in bed and slept like a baby,” I said.

“More like a comatose baby. Are you sure you had only a couple of snifters?” he said.

“Geez, I wasn’t really counting, so I don’t know.”

“Marco,” Dani said, “we’ve been together nearly fifteen years, and this is totally out of character for you. Is something wrong?”

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t sleep, so I had too much brandy.”

“Well, the two of us did polish off a fair amount of wine last night. Maybe the brandy finished you off.”

“Yeah, I think it did.”

“Anyhow, get into the bathroom and take that coffee with you.”



“Yes, Sir,” I said as I snapped to and saluted.

I went into the bathroom, took a sip of coffee, and stepped under a cold spray of water. Somewhat revived by that, I changed the temperature to warm, finished showering, and shaved. After I got dressed, I followed the smell of food into the kitchen, where Lucia, our live-in nanny, had all three boys in their high chairs and was supervising their breakfast.

“Something smells good,” I said.

“I decided to cook this morning,” Dani said. “Our usual bagels or cereal won’t be enough to offset all the sweet stuff we’ll probably be eating later.”

“The coffee helped, but I need something solid.”

I kissed Marcus, Bernardo, and Giovanni in turn, then settled myself in a chair at one end of the table. “Good morning, Lucia,” I said.

“Good morning, *Conte Marco*.”

“Are we back to that again? I don’t feel like *conte* anything, especially this morning, and just because my uncle and his two children went over a cliff in the mountains doesn’t change that fact.”

“I’m sorry, Cousin Marco,” she said.

“That’s much better.”

We weren’t actually cousins—given that she was descended from one of my numerous half-brothers, Lucia was actually my great-niece, many times removed. My father’s operatives had discovered a small group of his long-lost descendants living in a remote village in Sicily, and Lucia was from that village. She wanted to go to college, but her rather old-fashioned parents hadn’t wanted her to live in a dormitory, so she came to live with us and act as a nanny for the boys.

Lucia, having finished feeding the boys, lifted them out of their chairs, placed them on the floor, and shooed them to their bedroom. Dani placed a plate in front of me along with a glass of orange juice.

“Alone at last,” I said.

“Enjoy it while you can.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Want to tell me what kept you up last night?”

“As I may have told you over dinner, I had a pretty rotten day at the hospital.”

“Yeah, I remember,” he said, “but you’ve had rotten days before.”

“Then I had to sit in on a Council session.”

“So?” he said.

“There were a lot of very long discussions.”

“So?”

“Babe, they don’t just discuss things, they talk them to death. They talk about a topic until they’ve driven it into the ground, run a stake through its heart, and decapitated it.”

“Surely it can’t be that bad,” he said

“Believe me, it is. I don’t know how Father stands it, and he’s been sitting in those meetings longer than I care to think about.”

“What were they talking about?” he said.

“The main subject on the agenda last night revolved around whether or not to issue more residency visas to foreigners.”

“That doesn’t sound too complicated,” he said.

“One would think. Of the twelve members of the Council, about a third think the more people we have living and working here in the Duchy the better, another third see new residents as taking jobs and food away from existing residents, and the rest of them either don’t care or would prefer to maintain the status quo just because it is the status quo.”

“So, what happened?” he said. “Did they make a decision?”

“Are you kidding? After an hour of circular discussions and positing the same arguments over and over again, they finally agreed to table the proposal until a later meeting.”

“No shit!”

“No shit. Anyway, you know Father expects me to stand in for him while he’s on his honeymoon, and I have no doubt that he expects me to do so on a permanent basis when he decides that it’s time for him to retire from the scene. Knowing that, I lay in bed last night picturing endless decades of interminable meetings.... It was a very depressing thought, and, unlike counting sheep, it was *not* an inducement to sleep.”

That made him laugh.

“Babe,” I said, “it isn’t funny.”

“Of course it is, Marco, and self-pity doesn’t become you. In fact, it’s

not even like you, so snap out of it.”

“I guess.”

“No question about it, it just ain’t you. Besides which, you’ve got a full plate today. Your father, who just happens to be *il Duca d’Aragoni*, is throwing a birthday bash for his three youngest grandchildren.”

“Dani,” I said, “in a little over twenty-four-hundred years, my father has sired several hundred children, who have in turn produced thousands of descendants of their own. Three more aren’t that big of a deal to him.”

“You’d never know that to hear him tell it. Besides, the triplets are the sons of his youngest son.”

“Youngest for now... but not for long. Remember, he and Angelina are getting married in June.”

“True, but they may not be able to have children right away. Don’t forget the five-year gap between active phases.”

That was true. Father and his long-lived direct male descendants, myself included, might well represent the next step in human evolution, but Mother Nature gives and Mother Nature takes away. In simple terms, we only have normal fertility for about six months every five years. Angelina, we had determined, represented the female side of that next step, in that she only became fertile in a similar timeframe.

“Yeah,” I said, “and time will tell.”

“In any case, the boys will get a kick out of it.”

“Speaking of the boys,” I said, “are you ever gonna give some serious thought to having offspring of your own?”

“Babe, we’ve had this conversation countless times. My brothers are breeding like rabbits, so the Rosati name isn’t gonna die out any time soon. Besides which, I just don’t feel that particular urge. As far as I’m concerned, the triplets are as much mine as they are yours.”

“No argument there. Tell me again when we’re expected in the park?”

The complex of buildings in which we lived were adjacent to *il Castello d’Aragoni* and were collectively referred to as *il Castello*, even though they were several hundred years newer than the medieval castle nearby, which tourists paid a modest fee to tour. The castle complex sat in several acres of parkland and was in turn surrounded by walls, with the city of Aragoni spread out beyond the walls on all sides.

“The party starts at eleven, followed by a picnic-style lunch.”

“Have you checked the weather?” I said.

“It may be spring, but the mean elevation of the plateau of Aragoni is four thousand feet, so it’ll be a bit cool.”

“I was thinking about rain, fool.”

“Oh, that. There’s a twenty percent chance of rain.”

At the appointed time, Dani and I (with Lucia’s help) gathered up the tribe and carefully strapped a harness around each boy’s upper body before we headed for the elevator. We were each carrying one of the boys, but when we got to the main entrance of our building, we secured leashes to their harnesses and allowed them to walk on their own, subject to the restraints of the leash each of us held. Our building, one of three identical multi-story structures, dated back a couple of hundred years. In addition to apartments, the three buildings housed the administrative offices of the Aragoni Group and all of its many subsidiaries. They stood side by side, somewhat to the rear of il Castello d’Aragoni, the medieval castle—which was why the group of buildings comprising the castle complex were collectively referred to as il Castello. My father lived in a fourth and somewhat smaller building behind the three. The particular area of the park we were heading for was about a hundred yards from our building and contained a playground area for kids. When we arrived, there were already a dozen or more rug rats on the swings and slides and other equipment, so we unhooked the leashes and allowed the boys to join the fun, monitored closely by Lucia.

As we stood watching the boys play, I looked around the park. Dani and I had lived in Aragoni for more than four years and we still knew very few people—mostly because we were away two, sometimes more, weekends every month. We spent a weekend every month at my grandmother’s villa in Tuscany, visiting with her and my mother. Another weekend was devoted to a visit to Conti, where I, in my capacity as il Conte di Conti, had duties and obligations. Once in a while my grandmother came to Conti for the weekend when we were there, which spared us the obligation of a trip to Tuscany. I was startled out of my reverie by a familiar voice.

“You look lost in thought, Squirt.”

“Hey, Gert,” I said. “You’re absolutely right—I was totally lost in thought.”

Gertrude McClanahan had been persuaded at the time of the triplets’ birth to leave semi-retirement in Boston and take the job of head nurse at the

hospital in Aragoni where I worked. She had begun calling me “Squirt” during my residency at Mass General some years before.

“Deep thoughts?” she said.

“Hardly that. I was just reflecting on the fact that after four years, Dani and I still don’t know very many people here.”

“How could you?” she said. “You’re gone so much, and when you’re here you’re tied up with the kids. Kids do that to you, you know.”

“There speaks the voice of experience.”

“Damn straight. Been there, done that, as the young folks say.”

I spotted a familiar couple coming toward us and said, “Here comes the instigator of all this merriment with his bride-to-be.”

“They make a nice couple,” Gert said.

“You don’t think the Duke is too old for her?” Dani said, joining the conversation.

“For the man to be twenty or so years older isn’t always a bad thing,” she said.

*Gert, if only you knew. I wonder how you’d feel if you knew my father’s true age?*

“You think?” Dani said.

“Yes, I do,” she said.

“Hello, Father, Angelina,” I said. “I can’t remember whether or not you’ve met our friend Mrs. McClanahan.”

“Ah, yes,” Father said, “the nurses’ supervisor at the hospital that you recommended to Dr. Sanderson. Good to see you again. Mrs. McClanahan, have you met my fiancée Angelina Decaminada.”

Introductions completed, we chatted until everyone was distracted by the arrival of a couple of people wearing clown costumes and carrying balloons. The children got so excited by that momentous event that further conversation was impossible. Two hours later, Dani, Lucia, and I herded three tired little boys back into our building and up to their room where, once in bed, they were asleep in minutes.

“I don’t know about you guys,” I said as we looked at three sleeping toddlers, “but I’m ready for a nap myself.”

“Yeah,” Dani said. “Works for me.”

“I have some studying to do,” Lucia said.

## CHAPTER 2

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### *Marco*

THE day of the wedding was almost upon us, and the Duchy of Aragoni was bustling with activity in preparation for the festivities. Members of Father's far-flung family were arriving from all over the world, and there were literally no rooms at the inn—any inn. All of the vacant suites in the castle complex were occupied, as were the spare bedrooms of most residents, and there were “*siamo al completo*” signs in front of every hotel and bed-and-breakfast facility in the city and surrounding countryside. The wedding was to take place on Sunday, and a series of celebratory performances were to be held in the new Concert Hall at the university.

The University of Aragoni was home to one of the most respected music schools in Europe, and the new Concert Hall (actually a complex of three venues of different sizes) had been completed last year. The principal hall was also home to the largest pipe organ in Europe, and my father had funded an additional set of *trompettes en chamade*, or horizontal trumpets, to be installed in honor of his bride. They were officially named the Serafina Trumpets after the name which appeared on her birth certificate.

Angelina had been raised as an orphan, and Father's operatives had, after a lengthy investigation, discovered that Angelina's mother had changed her birth name after she'd fled the village where she was living with her husband—literally in the middle of the night, taking her infant daughter with her. Angelina and her mother had simply disappeared that night, and nobody, including her husband, knew where she had gone. Her mother had been killed in an accident when Angelina was about three years old. Her body had been recently exhumed, and radiocarbon dating of the bones had proven her age to have been approximately two hundred at the time of her death. This had been our first real proof that Angelina's female ancestors were, like the male members of our family, long lived.

On the Tuesday morning before the wedding, Sal, our assigned security person and bodyguard, drove us to the airport to meet the Aragoni Group's US-based Gulfstream, which was carrying several members of the family to Aragoni along with Dr. Thomas Foster and his partner Noah Webster. Tom had performed the dedicatory recital on the new pipe organ the previous year, and Noah, who was a bass/baritone, had presented a vocal recital in the smaller hall. Father had been so taken by their performances that he had engaged them to provide the music for the wedding, and both men were scheduled to perform in concert as well. Tom and Noah had become friends of ours and were staying with us. As usual, the jet taxied up to the hangar, was towed into it, and the hangar doors were closed before anyone disembarked. Several people, whom I didn't recognize but to most of whom I was probably related, exited the plane before the familiar faces of Tom and Noah appeared in the doorway. When they reached the spot where we were standing, we exchanged hugs.

"Gosh," I said, "it's so good to see you guys again."

"Likewise," Tom said.

"Yeah," Noah said, "and he's really looking forward to playing that organ again."

With Sal's help, we got the SUV loaded with our guests' bags and headed back to town and the castle complex.

"What's first on your agenda, Tom?" I said.

"A visit to the baths and a massage, if you please."

"What a surprise," Dani said. "We remember how much you guys enjoyed the baths when you were here before."

"Yeah," Tom said, "where else can you go and find baths patterned after the baths in ancient Rome?"

"We found it amazing," Noah added, "and we've told a lot of people about them."

"I hope you told them that there were two baths," I said, "one for tourists, and another smaller facility for family and guests."

"Absolutely," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Did you ever install a hot tub on your deck? You talked about it."

"You bet we did," Noah said, "and we're really enjoying it."



“I’ve got a copy of the official schedule for you, Tom,” I said, “and a list of the times when you’ll have access to the organs at the concert hall and at the cathedral. A lot of the concert hall times seem to be very late in the evening.”

“That was by request,” Tom said. “Remember, I’m doing the concert for free in exchange for a specified amount of access to the organ and the hall for recording sessions. There are fewer scheduling conflicts late in the evening and less chance of being interrupted.”

“The world premiere recording of the organ that Tom made last year has sold really well,” Noah said. “We’ve had to order more copies from the company that manufactures the CDs.”

“I’ve been on your website,” I said, “and there are a lot of CDs listed on it.”

“Yeah,” Tom said, “it took a while for sales to take off, but it’s become a steady source of revenue for us.”

Sal pulled into the parking garage, dropped us off at the elevators, and a few minutes later we were upstairs in our apartment. “You’re in the same bedroom you were in last year, guys,” Dani said. “Do you want to unpack before we go down to the baths?”

“Just give us a couple of minutes to change into fresh clothes,” Tom said, “and we’ll be ready to go.”

When Tom and Noah emerged from their bedroom, I handed each of them a plastic keycard. “Here you go,” I said. “You remember how things work—you’ll need this to get in and out of the building, among other things.”

“Absolutely,” Tom said.

We went down to the baths and spent some time in the *calidarium*; then while our guests took advantage of the massage services, we moved to the *tepidarium* for a while. We timed things so that when we went to the showers we met Tom and Noah there.

“Feel better?” I said.

“You know we do,” Tom said. “A hot soak and a massage should be offered after every transatlantic flight.”

“Yeah,” Noah said. “By the way, is it just me or are the baths a lot more crowded than they were last time we were here?”

“They’re more crowded,” I said. “Both the castle and the city are full of guests from all over the world, and many of them are distant cousins.”

Actually, given that I was the son of il Duca and many of the visitors were his sons and grandsons many times removed, the relationship was slightly different.

“No kidding?” Noah said.

“No kidding. This wedding is a big deal, and it’s given a lot of people an excuse to have the sort of family gathering that only happens once every generation or so. Dani and I have been to at least half a dozen State dinners in the past ten days, and I’ve totally lost count of how many relatives I’ve met for the first time.”

“You’re just upset because you have to attend those Council meetings,” Dani said.

“Babe,” I said, “I’ll trade places with you in a heartbeat.”

“He doesn’t like meetings,” Dani said.

“Correction,” I said, “I don’t like interminable meetings, during which things are discussed ad nauseam and decisions are seldom made.”

“Then why don’t you do something about it?” Dani said.

“Like what?”

“Geez, I don’t know. Wait a minute, doesn’t the US Senate have some sort of rule they can use to end debate?” Dani said.

“Oh, yeah, it’s called ‘cloture’,” I said. “I’m gonna have a talk with my father about that.”

“Way to go, Marco,” Dani said. “Kick ass and bring ’em into the twenty-first century.”

“Are you guys hungry?” I said.

“Hardly,” Tom said. “We were served a huge breakfast just before we crossed the coastline of Europe.”

“I’ll second that,” Noah said.

“The concert hall is available until three o’clock if you want to go over there now,” I said.

“You bet,” Tom said. “I can’t wait to get my hands on that new trumpet stop.”

“By three, we’ll probably be ready for lunch,” Noah said.

“What are we waiting for?” Dani said.

“You don’t have to go with us,” Tom said, “if you have other things to do. I remember how to get there.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “We’ll go with you, wait until you’re settled, and then go shopping or something. Also, I need to call someone over there to have them meet us in the hall—they’ve assigned a different student to you this time and I have a contact number for him.”

“What happened to the old one?” Noah said.

“He’s doing some graduate work in the States,” Tom said. “I get an occasional e-mail from him, don’t you remember?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it.”

I made the call, then we headed to the elevators. Once we were out of the building and waiting for the tram, we had a conversation about lunch. “Any favorite places that you recall from your last visit?” I asked our guests.

“Not really,” Noah said, “they were all wonderful.”

“Yeah, and our favorite spot, which as you know is Poco, will be jammed because it’s in the heart of the old quarter/tourist area.”

“What about that little Greek restaurant that Andreas and Nick took us to last month?” Dani said. “It’s definitely not in the main tourist area.”

“Yeah, and as I recall, you guys like Greek food.”

“If it’s anything like the dinner that Nick cooked for us last time we were here,” Tom said, “it’ll be just fine.”

“That’s settled, then,” I said. “Papa’s it is.”

“Papa’s?” Noah parroted.

“The full name of the restaurant is Miklos Papageorgiou,” Dani said, “but the name is almost unpronounceable, so people refer to it as Papa’s.”

“Here comes the tram,” I said.

Both cars of the tram were full—standing room only. Fortunately it was a short ride to the university, and we were soon at the concert hall stop. When we walked up to the hall, Tom’s helper was waiting for us at the side door and greeted him effusively. The guy was an organ major who had attended last year’s concert and was more than a little bit in awe of Tom’s talent. He led us into the hall and turned on the lights.

“I still can’t get over how much this concert hall resembles a Gothic cathedral,” Noah said.

"I think that was the intent of its designers," I said. "Here in the Duchy, most building materials, especially lumber, have to be imported. On the other hand we have an unlimited supply of native stone in the surrounding mountains, and the quarries have been active for some two thousand years."

"The guy who helped me last year," Tom said, "told me that the well-known acoustics of stone buildings were a major influence, as well."

Indeed, the building resembled a Gothic cathedral externally and, for that matter, from the inside as well, the only difference being that the east end of the structure contained a stage rather than a choir area and ambulatory. Most of the organ pipes were highly visible as they were mounted in ornate cases attached to the east end of the building. I turned to look at the gallery organ, whose case surrounded and framed the windows high on the west wall.

"I guess that's the new trumpet stop," I said, pointing at a carefully arranged bank of shiny gold pipes protruding from the gallery organ.

"Yes, Sir," the student said. "The Serafina Trumpets operate on an extremely high wind pressure, and they are really loud. Would you like to hear them?"

"Sure," I said.

He climbed on the bench, pushed a few buttons, pressed a single key on one of the manuals, and a deep brassy sound filled the hall. Before that sound had stopped reverberating in the room, he played a short fanfare.

"Oh, my God," Dani said, "I think my goose bumps had goose bumps of their own from that."

The student slid off the bench, Tom took his place, and they began to discuss what stops to use for what pieces. "I think that's our cue to go," I said.

"We'll see you at three," Noah said. "On the other hand, if you come back around two thirty, Tom might be ready to give you a run-through of the piece he composed for the dedication of the trumpets."

"Then we'll see you at two thirty," I said.

We left the concert hall and took the tram to the central train station. Then we spent an hour or so wandering around the old shopping district and quickly found that the street that was set aside for pedestrians was literally wall-to-wall people.

"Gonna be a lot of happy merchants when the festivities are over," Dani said while we sat at an outdoor café table and drank a glass of wine.

"No kidding. I guess that means our tenants won't have a problem

paying their rent this month.”

“Fool. They’ve never had a problem, and you know it. Investing in that building was a smart move on your part.”

“I seem to recall hearing a certain amount of skepticism from you at the time.”

“I just hadn’t thought it through, that’s all,” he said.

After I had inherited the title of il Conte di Conti a few years earlier, it was discovered that one of the Conti Group’s managers had been stealing from the business for years and had bribed the auditors in the process. We had sued the auditing firm and won a huge settlement, most of which we had reinvested in the business. I had withdrawn some of the surplus for my personal use and had set up a holding company which purchased a couple of commercial buildings. The rental income was being invested in other properties.

“By the time we’re ready to retire, we’ll have more than enough rental income to live pretty much as we like,” I said.

“Babe, we could do that now,” he said.

“Don’t forget we have three sons to raise. At some point, they’re gonna need to be sent off to a good boarding school.”

“Yeah, and we haven’t really talked about that.”

“True,” I said, “and the best schools have waiting lists.”

“You could probably get them into your old school as, what’s the term—‘legacy students’?”

“I was kind of thinking about Eton,” I said, “but it might not be a bad idea for them to go to school in the States, and if they’re going to do that, Groton is one of the best.”

“In either case, they’d be fluent in English by the time they’ve finished.”

“Speaking of which,” I said, “we need to start using English at home with them, at least part of the time.”

“Yeah, and I think Lucia is kind of eager to polish her English skills as well.”

“The more languages they grow up speaking, the better off they’ll be,” I said.

“By the way, are we still gonna enroll in the next Etruscan language course?”

“You bet.”

As far as the rest of the world knew, nobody had spoken Etruscan for more than two millennia, and the last man known to have been able to read the language was the Emperor Claudius. Father had grown up speaking Etruscan because several members of his family were scholars, and it was now regarded as the “secret” language of the family. Had I been raised in Aragoni, I would have grown up speaking the language—the fact that I had been born and raised in the States had prevented that from happening.

“Ready to go back to il Castello and check out a car?” I said.

“Sure. I just hope they’re not all taken.”

“Not to worry—I made a reservation.”

“When did you do that?” he said.

“The minute I was handed Tom’s rehearsal schedule.”

“That’s my boy—thinking ahead.”

We walked back to the train station and caught the next tram headed home. When we got to the castle complex, we went into the parking garage, picked up the car, and drove back to the concert hall and parked. Inside the hall, we found Tom deep in conversation with the organ student.

“You guys are just in time,” Noah said as we walked up to the console. “Tom’s about a minute or two away from doing a complete run-through of his Toccata and Fugue for Dueling Trumpets.”

“In that case,” I said, “we’ll settle down in the front row.”

Dani and I left the stage, went to the front row, and picked a pair of seats which gave us a clear view of Tom’s hands and feet. To say that we were blown away during the next fifteen minutes would be an understatement. The toccata section of the piece was a bit subdued at first, and even my untrained ear could tell that Tom was using it to demonstrate what I had learned were nearly all of the reed stops in the organ. The toccata came to a glorious climax, and then there was a brief pause. After the pause, a single trumpet stop in the main organ was used to play a short theme. That theme was echoed by a really loud trumpet stop from the gallery organ at the rear of the hall, after which the duel began in earnest with each section of the organ seemingly vying to outdo the other with variations on the theme. Of course the new Serafina Trumpets won by simply overpowering the competition.

When the last remnant of sound died, Dani and I applauded enthusiastically.

“Bravo, Tom,” I said when we were again on the stage, standing beside the console.

“That was totally awesome,” Dani said.

“I think we’re ready for lunch,” Noah said, “just as soon as I gather up all of this music.”

“I’ve invited Gianni to join us,” Tom said. “I trust that was okay.”

Gianni was the organ major who had been assigned to Tom. He was also organist at St. Mary’s Anglican Cathedral in Aragoni.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Gianni, I hope you like Greek food because we’re going to Papa’s.”

“I love Greek food, Signor Conte,” Gianni said, “and I’m well acquainted with Papa’s.”

“We’re ready when you guys are,” I said.

“Give us a minute to unplug the console and roll it out of the way,” Gianni said. “The symphony will be using the hall for the next several hours.”

We watched, fascinated, as Tom helped Gianni drape a quilted cover over the console and bench, both of which were mounted on a low, rolling platform. The cover had obviously been made to order because it fit like a glove. Then Gianni knelt down, carefully unplugged some cables, and he and Tom rolled the console off stage and into a compartment built into the side wall. Gianni closed the double doors to the compartment and locked it.

“All right,” he said, “now she is safe.”

“She?” I parroted.

“I think of all consoles as she,” he said, “because back home, the organ consoles in both of the churches where I have played can be temperamental bitches.”

Tom laughed and said, “Having encountered a number of temperamental consoles in the past, I can certainly relate to that.”

“Those cables you unplugged were pretty small,” Dani said, “considering all the signals they must carry.”

His remark caused Gianni to smile politely and Tom to laugh outright.

“What’s so funny?” Dani said.

“In the old days before computers,” Tom said, “there would have been a

cable as thick as a fire hose running from the wall to the console, which contained a separate wire for each of the many thousands of pipes, along with dozens of wires for controls and other things, and it couldn't be unplugged; and if one of those wires got broken somehow, fixing it was difficult. When microchips came along, the controls became computerized and the signals from the console to the organ travel over a single Ethernet cable."

"That's progress," Gianni said.

Our guests thoroughly enjoyed eating at Papa's. Tom and Noah discussed the menu and, wanting to try everything, seemed to be at an impasse until Dani stepped into the discussion. "Tom," Dani said, "why don't you order one combination platter and Noah can order the other one? That way, you'll have at least five different dishes between you and you can share them."

"Works for me," Noah said.

"Yeah," Tom said, "let's go for it."

Over our meal, we learned that Gianni was from Buenos Aires, his grandparents having emigrated from Italy to Argentina just before World War II. "I'd never have guessed it," I said. "You speak Italian like a native."

"We lived in a neighborhood that was mostly Italian," he said, "and it was my cradle language. I didn't actually learn a lot of Spanish until I started school."

"There are a number of historic organs in Buenos Aires that bear the name of Cavaillé-Coll, the famous nineteenth-century organ builder," Tom said, "have you played any of them?"

"Yeah," Gianni said, "there are something like twenty of them, although only one is considered to be pure Cavaillé-Coll—the others bear the prefix Mutin, which is the name of the man who headed the company when they were installed. To answer your question, yes, I've played two or three of them, most of which were in pretty bad shape."

"Tom has performed at Saint-Sulpice in Paris," Noah said, "and they have one of the best organs by that builder."

That comment by Noah sent Tom and Gianni off on a jargon-filled discussion of pipe organs that left the rest of us behind. Noah looked at Dani and me, shrugged, and said, "This happens a lot when we're on the road."

"Don't worry about it," I said, "they're enjoying themselves."

"Yeah," he said.



We finished lunch and drove Gianni back to the University. Before he got out of the car, he and Tom compared schedules and arranged to meet for Tom's next rehearsal. We arrived in our apartment just in time to help Lucia supervise the triplets' supper, so I said, "You're on your own, guys. Dani and I are gonna get domestic for a while. Then I've got to attend a meeting of the Council, which will kill the rest of my evening."

"Don't worry about it, Marco," Tom said. "We know where everything is."

"Yeah," Noah said. "We'll probably spend some time online catching up with e-mail and things, go back to the baths for a soak, have a couple of glasses of wine, and crash."

## CHAPTER 3

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### *Marco*

I TOOK a shower, dressed in a comfortable suit, and prepared to go to the Council meeting. The boys were romping around in their room, so I took a minute to give each of them a hug. Dani, who was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room playing with them, looked up at me expectantly as I was making the rounds.

“Don’t worry, babe,” I said, “you’ll get yours later.”

I bent down and kissed him. “Knock ’em dead, Conte Marco,” he said.

“Yeah. See you later.”

I took the elevator to a sub-basement level and walked down the wide underground corridor to the adjacent building, which housed the administrative offices for all of the various family enterprises as well as the Council chambers. In the Council chambers, I took my seat at the head of the long table and waited for the members to gather. In addition to governing the affairs of the Duchy of Aragoni, the governing council was also responsible for managing all of the far-flung business enterprises of the family. There were twelve Council members, six of whom were sons of il Duca and therefore my half-brothers, and six of whom were descendants of father’s many sons, which made them my nephews to one degree or another. Their ages ranged from a very young two hundred to one of my half-brothers who was born shortly after the fall of Rome. While I was waiting for everyone’s arrival, I set my laptop on the table in front of me, opened it, and ran a fingertip across the touchpad to bring the device to life. After a moment or two, it recognized the secure wireless network and connected to it. Father arrived and carried his laptop to the other end of the table at about the same time as the rest of the members began to trickle in. As the members settled in their seats, the instant messaging program on my screen came to life.

*“Start the meeting whenever you’re ready,”* Father sent.

He and I had come up with the idea of instant messaging back and forth as a means of silent communication after the first Council session I had chaired, and it had been a godsend. I looked at the printed agenda which had been placed on the table in front of every chair and said, “Gentlemen, I think it’s time to bring the meeting to order.” I waited for the group to quiet down and continued. “Ramsey,” I said, “I believe you have a report for us on the status of our extended family.” Ramsey Price was the father of Trevor Price, who happened to be the first family member Dani and I had met when we stepped off of Father’s Learjet on our arrival in the Duchy.

“Thank you, Marco,” Ramsey said, “that I do. I am pleased to report that in the three years since Marco presented the family not only with triplets but with a methodology for significantly increasing our birthrate, our numbers have increased by several thousand—split almost equally between male and female births, and pretty much evenly divided between family members here in Aragoni and in various family enclaves around the world. Over two thousand family members have had multiple births, and at least half that many are looking forward to multiple births within the next few months. There is, of course, a downside to this good news—which is that with such a rapid increase in our numbers, the quarterly dividend that all family members and their spouses or significant others receive will be somewhat reduced—at least for a while.”

As a family member, I held a certain number of voting shares in the family enterprises, and as a spouse or significant other, Dani had an equal number of non-voting shares. The owners of both classes of stock received quarterly dividends—in my case, from the moment I was born, and in Dani’s case, from the moment we became a couple. This was true for all of Father’s descendants.

Several members made appropriate comments, and I moved the meeting along to the next item on the agenda, and the next, and the next, as various members reported, sometimes at great length, on the many successes and occasional failures of the family enterprises. Finally, we came to the proposal that had been tabled and postponed at each of the three previous meetings, and the usual talkathon began. I stood it as long as I could, then I sent a message to Father.

*“This has gone on long enough, so I’m going to put a stop to it.”*

*“Go for it,”* he sent.

When the person speaking wound down, I took over. “Gentlemen,” I

said, “we’ve been talking about this for nearly an hour, and nothing new has been said since the first fifteen minutes of the discussion. For that matter, there wasn’t anything said in the first fifteen minutes that wasn’t said when we discussed this at the last meeting, and at the meeting before that, and at the meeting before that. We need a mechanism which can be put in place to call a halt to pointless debate.”

“What kind of mechanism?” Jason Randolph said.

“You’re from the United States,” I said. “Think about what your Senate does when there has been more than enough debate.”

“You mean ‘cloture’?” he said.

“Just so, or something similar to it. We need a rule which, when invoked, will bring matters to a head and force a vote.”

Twelve pairs of eyes immediately swiveled in the direction of the other end of the table, so Father took the hint and stood up to speak.

“Conte Marco is absolutely correct,” Father said, using my inherited title to make a point, “and that is one of the reasons why he will be standing in for me when I go on my wedding trip next week. He is younger than the rest of you and brings a fresh point of view to these discussions; on the other hand, as a doctor, he is trained not to be rash or take unnecessary chances. Several years ago he somewhat reluctantly took on the duties of *il Conte di Conti*, rose to the occasion, and has managed the affairs of that family without detracting from his duties at the hospital—which, I might add, is no less than I would expect from a son of mine.

“This is the fourth time that this relatively minor proposal has been discussed, and he is correct—nothing new has been said since we discussed it the first time, so it is time we held a vote on this topic. Also, I want our parliamentarian to come up with a procedure which can be used to cut off debate when the topics of discussion neither threaten our national security nor our livelihoods.”

Father sat down, and the minute he did, I seized the moment. “Gentlemen,” I said, “it’s time to take a vote. All in favor of the proposal, raise your hands.” Hands were raised and counted. “All opposed, likewise.” Again hands were raised and counted. “The ‘nays’ have it, and the proposal is defeated.”

The rest of the meeting was anticlimactic and ended on a much lighter note. The final item on the agenda involved expanding the family operations in Australia, and I found it fascinating. The member in overall charge of

Pacific Rim operations presented a report suggesting that it was time to make the Australian operations much more productive and profitable.

“We own both a sheep station and a cattle station in Australia,” he said, “each of which is more than one million hectares in size, and can be made to support a considerable population if we employ some of the farming techniques with which we’ve been experimenting in South America for the past few years. An operation encompassing one million hectares may sound enormous to some of you, but by Australian standards they are somewhat modest—there are several operations ‘down under’ which are twice that size and larger. These properties may become important in the coming years if the family continues to grow at the same rate it is growing at the moment.”

After considerable discussion, he was directed to prepare an in-depth report detailing the costs and timetable involved. When the meeting ended, I braced myself for some pithy comments from various Council members concerning the bombshell I had dropped, but there were none. The consensus of the group was summed up by Ramsey Price, who said, “We should have done something like this decades ago.”

We had the usual post-meeting glass of wine, and then I excused myself, saying, “If you don’t mind, we have guests and I need to get back to my apartment.”

“I will walk with you as far as the corridor that leads to my building,” Father said.

With that, he and I headed to the elevators, and when we reached the underground corridor, he invited me to his apartment for a nightcap, guests notwithstanding. In his library, we settled down with glasses of forty-year-old port and talked about the meeting.

“I’m sorry if I put you on the spot earlier,” I said.

“Not to worry, you did just the sort of thing I had hoped you would do.”

“On another topic,” I said, “I’ve been meaning to ask you how the search for Angelina’s family is coming.”

“I believe we are making progress,” he said. “Do you remember the interview with the woman whose great-grandmother caused the fuss that eventually drove Angelina’s mother to run away?”

When Father’s team had located the village in which Angelina was born, they interviewed a middle-aged woman whose mother had been the midwife at Angelina’s birth. She reported that her mother’s grandmother had come to live with them a year or so later, and when the ninety-five-year-old

woman had seen Angelina's mother in the village square, she claimed to have met her eighty years previously, claiming further that Angelina's mother still looked the same as she had looked all those years ago. The resulting controversy had ultimately forced Angelina's mother to flee in the middle of the night, taking her infant daughter with her.

"Absolutely. How could I forget that?"

"We have located the village of the woman's birth," he said.

"Well done."

"Exactly. Now that we know where she lived, we know where she saw Angelina's mother, and that narrows the search quite a bit. I am hoping that by the time Angelina and I are back in the castle we may have some answers."

"That would certainly make one heck of a wedding gift," I said.

"Talking about Angelina's mother," he said, "I keep marveling at the fact that she gave birth to Angelina when she was nearly two hundred years old."

"There's a highly probable explanation for that," I said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Do you remember all of the publicity surrounding birth control pills?"

"Which publicity?" he said.

"Let me start over. Birth control pills were effective and popular because what they did was suppress ovulation in the female body. If no egg was released, pregnancy couldn't happen."

"That much I remember," he said. "What of it?"

"Some years later, women began having babies at a much later age than formerly, and researchers eventually figured out why—that is, a typical female is born with a certain number of eggs already present in her ovaries. Suppress the release of eggs by taking the pill during her late teens and into her twenties and you prolong her fertile period. So, after she stops taking the pill, she begins to once again release eggs until she has released all that she is capable of releasing."

"And that applies to Angelina's mother how?" he said.

"Think about an average female who is fertile from, say, age fifteen until age forty—twenty-five years to make it easy to calculate. Twenty-five years times twelve monthly cycles totals three hundred eggs. Now think about

Angelina and her female forebears—they release perhaps six eggs every five years—less, if they happen to get pregnant. If the same thing holds true for them as for normal females, their six-month cycles every five years would extend to two hundred and fifty years or so and beyond. That’s assuming that Mother Nature hasn’t thrown a few extras in along with the other things that make them different.”

“When you put it that way, it makes sense,” he said. “Still, I think she is a little upset by the fact that she will only be able to give birth once every five years.”

“Actually,” I said, “there may be a solution for that.”

“Really?”

“Ever hear of in vitro fertilization?”

“Yes, I have,” he said, “but the details elude me at the moment.”

“To put it simply, the woman’s eggs are harvested and then fertilized in a laboratory environment. The resulting embryos can be frozen and later implanted in the woman when pregnancy is desired.”

“And you think this procedure might allow Angelina and other women like her to have a child every couple of years, should they wish it?”

“I don’t see why not, provided Mother Nature hasn’t thrown her any curves. There’s just so much we don’t know.”

“Speaking of what we do not know,” Father said, “what is the latest on Dani’s research?”

“He continues to plug away at it, but if you ask me, it’s a hopeless task.”

“Why do you say that?” he said.

“All a gene does is cause the body to produce a particular type of protein, usually only one. He’s looking at a combination of five known genes with the added complication of two unique genes. The odds of figuring out the precise amount of each protein needed are way beyond astronomical.”

“Then what, if anything, is the solution—if it becomes necessary to extend a longer life to others?” he said.

“Gene therapy, perhaps,” I said. “I don’t know enough about it to go into detail, but I think we’re going to have to get involved in it in some way.”

“Yes, but how?”

“Isn’t Switzerland famous for its clinics? Clinics that use all manner of unusual treatments, which promise all manner of exciting results?”

“Yes, but...,” he said.

“Maybe we could open a clinic in Switzerland offering the possibility of extended life spans. Mind you, it would have to have a dozen or more degrees of separation between the actual clinic and us, and it would be years—decades, perhaps—before any results could be proven.”

“That is an interesting idea,” he said.

“Yeah, but at the moment it’s just an idea, and I’m just tired enough to say that I’m feeling the wine and the port. I think it’s time for me to go to bed.”

“No argument there. Go get your rest, my boy, you have certainly earned it this night.”

“By the way,” I said, “did you know that Dr. Foster has composed a piece for the organ which will be given its premiere at the concert Friday?”

“Yes. I’ve seen a copy of the program, why?”

“Because Dani and I heard him play it earlier today, and all I can say is that it’s gonna knock people’s socks off—it’s that amazing.”

“Frankly, I would expect nothing less from such a talented young man.”

“Tom told me that there are only three pipe organs in the world capable of doing justice to the piece.”

“Really?” he said.

“Yes, Sir. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City has a set of State Trumpets; Liverpool Cathedral in the UK has their Trumpets Militaire; and now we have the Serafina Trumpets here in Aragoni.”

“What makes them so different?” he said.

“Tom says it’s the fact that they operate at a very high wind pressure. The average church organ operates on around five to seven inches of wind, as such things are measured. The State Trumpets at St. John the Divine operate on fifty inches of wind, as do the trumpets in Liverpool and here.”

“That is very interesting, but I thought you were going to bed.”

“Yes, Sir, I am. Good night.”

I retraced my steps, took the elevator down, walked back to my building, and took that elevator back up to our floor—wondering if anyone



had ever seriously considered some sort of people-mover between the buildings. The apartment was dark and extremely quiet when I unlocked the door, so I went into the master suite, quietly undressed in the walk-in closet, and crawled in bed with a sleeping Dani.

“That was a long meeting,” he said, coming to life next to me.

“Father invited me to his apartment for a nightcap.”

“And?” he said.

“Babe, it was a long meeting, and he and I had a long conversation. On top of that, I’ve had a glass of wine and at least two glasses of port. Can I give you the blow-by-blow account in the morning?”

“Sure.”

I rolled over on my side and pressed my naked body tightly against his. “I thought you were tired,” he said.

“Babe, when have I ever been that tired?”

“When you were working double shifts as an intern?” he said.

“That was a long time ago.”

I silenced further conversation by covering his mouth with mine.

## CHAPTER 4

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### *Marco*

TOM and Noah assured us that they were both willing and able to fend for themselves, so Dani and I went back to work the next morning. We did leave the hospital at noon Friday so we could participate in the wedding rehearsal. I was acting as best man, and Dani had been asked to give the bride away because both of Angelina's available male relatives—her adopted father and her paternal grandfather—were too infirm to walk down the aisle with her.

The rehearsal went off without a hitch. Although the wedding was being held in St. Mary's Anglican Cathedral with the Dean of the Cathedral officiating, a Roman Catholic priest would assist in the ceremony in deference to the bride and her family. The rehearsal dinner, which was actually a late luncheon, took place in the banquet room of the largest hotel in town, and the wine flowed freely. At one point, Father said to Tom and Noah, who were sitting opposite himself and Angelina, "You gentlemen don't seem to be enjoying the food and wine."

"That's not it at all, Sir," Tom said. "I have a concert tomorrow evening, and Noah will be on stage performing in his own concert this evening—with me as his accompanist. We've learned the hard way not to overindulge during the twenty-four hours preceding such events."

"That's true," Noah said. "We'll make up for it after the wedding."

"How are your recording sessions coming, Tom?" I said.

"Couldn't be better. By the time we fly back to Florida, I'll have enough material for at least three new CDs, plus the live recording of the concert tomorrow evening, which will be a two-CD set."

"Don't forget tomorrow morning," Noah said.

"What happens tomorrow morning?" Father said.

"I'm going to perform all of Maurice Durufle's organ compositions for

the faculty and students of the music school,” Tom said, “and we’re going to make a live recording.”

“How long will that take?” I said.

“Durufle wasn’t a prolific composer,” Tom said. “He is known to have spent months fine-tuning each work. His entire output can be listened to in about three hours, and all of his organ works will fit on a single CD. At least one musicologist has written that Durufle felt uneasy about having his works published, for fear they would prove to be imperfect in some way. His Suite for organ is widely regarded as one of the most difficult works to play in all organ literature.”

“Marco,” Noah said, “will there be royalty at the wedding tomorrow?”

“Hardly,” I said. “Father’s title is Duke, which is as high as it gets among the nobility. The only royal dukes are the ones married to royalty.”

“You mean like Queen Elizabeth’s husband?” Noah said.

“Exactly. I think her children are probably dukes and duchesses of something or other, which makes them royal dukes as well.”

“In addition to that,” Father said, “ordinary dukes, even though they may be rich and powerful, do not consider themselves to be on the same level as the royals, even in England.”

“But,” Noah persisted, “aren’t most of them related—at least in the UK?”

“That does not change a thing,” Father said. “It is a matter of protocol, and I am more than glad to say that I do not have to deal with any part of it.”

“You’re very quiet this afternoon, Angelina,” I said.

“It’s all an act,” she said. “Inside I’m overflowing with joy. As you know, I just graduated from the university, and I’m about to embark on a new life—how could I not be excited?”

“Are you going to do any post-graduate work?” Dani said.

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Do you think the other students will behave differently toward you when you become the wife of *il Duca*?”

“I certainly hope not,” she said, “because going to class won’t be easy for me if they do.”

On the way back to the castle, I said, “Tom, can anybody come to your performance tomorrow morning?”

“I don’t know about ‘anybody,’” he said, “but you and Dani are

certainly welcome. I have to tell you, though, that some of what I'll be playing will be more to a musician's taste than that of the general public."

"What he's trying to say," Noah said, "is that some of the pieces aren't exactly crowd pleasers."

"On the other hand," Tom said, "the last two items on the program, which are the '*Prelude et Fugue sur le nom d'Alain*' and the Suite, definitely fall into that category."

"We'll be there," I said.

The concert hall complex consisted of three venues—the main hall, a much smaller auditorium seating seven hundred, and a little theater which seated about a hundred spectators around the stage. Noah's performance that evening was in the smaller auditorium, and we were there to cheer him on, as were Father, Angelina, and a capacity crowd. We went backstage after the performance and waited until the last of Noah's fans and well-wishers departed before escorting our guests back to our apartment, where we had a nightcap in our den before we retired for the night. By eight the next morning, Dani and I were finishing up a light breakfast and preparing to go to the concert hall, Tom and Noah having left somewhat earlier. When we arrived at the hall, there were only a handful of people present, so we settled down in a pair of seats in the front row somewhat to the right of center so that we had a side view of Tom's hands and feet.

By the time Tom slid onto the bench and began to play, there were at least two or three hundred people in the audience. As I looked around the hall, I spotted a couple of students manning the recording equipment. Before Tom began to play, Noah asked the audience to refrain from applause for a full thirty seconds after each piece "so the wonderful reverberations in this hall can be picked up by the microphones without being drowned out by the applause." Tom was right—the first few pieces were entirely too cerebral for a non-musician to fully appreciate. The final two works, however, made up for it. Afterward, Tom managed to gracefully extricate himself from all of the well-wishers surrounding him, pleading a need to rest for the evening's performance.

When we got home, Tom and Noah immediately went downstairs to take advantage of the baths. When they returned, they had a light lunch and retired to their room for a long nap. Dani and I, with Lucia's help, took the boys to the playground just long enough for them to thoroughly wear themselves out. When we finally went back upstairs, they went to bed without a whimper, and we decided to visit the baths, which were even more crowded than they had been a few days earlier—so much so that we had to share a

dressing room. We saw a number of familiar faces seated around the perimeter of the *calidarium*, as well as a few faces that I recognized from the several state banquets we'd attended. Which of course meant that rather than sit and soak as was our custom, we had to circulate and socialize a bit. When we finally moved on to the *tepidarium*, we had the same problem—so we made the best of it.

Dani summed it up after we had showered and were back in the privacy of our dressing room: "Nothing like getting naked and socializing with a hundred or more relatives."

"Yeah," I said, "sorry about that."

"At least it's a one-time thing."

"Yeah, no more weddings in Father's future."

When we reached our apartment, the silence said it all—everyone was still asleep. Naturally, we went straight to our bed, but we somehow never got around to napping. Later, Tom and Noah appeared in the kitchen, while we were dealing with the boys' meal.

"You guys look well and truly rested," I said.

"Yeah," Noah said, stifling a yawn. "I think we well and truly are."

"What's your pleasure food-wise?" Dani said.

"Anything, as long as it's reasonably filling—and light," Tom said.

"We were sort of planning on grilled chicken breasts and a vegetable or two."

"Sounds perfect," Noah said.

"I'll get them started, Dani, while you finish feeding our hungry tribe," I said.

"Go for it," Dani said.

We had a light supper with our guests and, when the time came, retired to our respective bedrooms to prepare for the evening ahead. As he had done the year before, Sal drove Tom and Noah to the concert hall an hour before the performance, and by the time he returned with the car it was time for us to leave. We entered the hall through the main entrance and made our way through the crowd to the foot of the stairs. I handed our tickets to the man behind the rope, who said, "Thank you, Signor Conte," and admitted us. This time we knew to wait in the anteroom when we arrived at the Ducal box—when the new hall had been dedicated the year before, we had gone straight to our seats until Father had invited us back into the anteroom for Champagne. As before, a pair of champagne buckets beaded with condensation were

sitting on a small side table, and I took a peek at the labels on the bottles they contained.

“Clicquot Yellow Label,” I read. “Good choice.”

We settled down in a pair of chairs and waited for the rest of our party to arrive, which they did a few minutes later. Father was once again wearing what could best be described as a costume suitable for playing the lead role in *The Student Prince*, and Angelina was on his arm.

She wore a simple but expensive gown. Even a person who didn’t know much about fashion could tell that it was both elegant and classic. A simple top with full ball gown skirt, it was made from a beautiful lace, the color of which reminded me of old gold. The top was scalloped, sleeveless, and held up by the thinnest of straps. Her dress shimmered in the light due to hundreds of small rhinestones tastefully sewn into the lace. I later heard someone refer to the rhinestones as Swarovski Crystals, adding, “Only the best for the Duke’s future wife.” I couldn’t help but be impressed with the jewelry she was wearing, which was expensive but tasteful and not done in a way to show off. Her jewelry set done in twenty-eight-carat gold was an homage to nature. Her necklace, earrings, and bracelets featured gold leaves with minuscule diamonds set in between for just a little added sparkle.

Angelina caught me admiring her jewelry and couldn’t wait to tell me about it—the jewelry maker was a discovery she and Father had made in the old quarter. He was very much inspired by nature, and had made a mold of actual leaves into which he later poured melted gold. She had actually seen it being created and found the process fascinating. She also liked the idea of promoting a local artisan.

With them was an elderly couple Dani and I hadn’t met but whom I knew to be Angelina’s paternal grandparents, Signor and Signora Traverso. Her grandfather walked with the use of two short aluminum canes, which featured hand grips and ended with a sort of metal cuff or bracelet around each wrist—they are known as forearm crutches. Father made the introductions, then asked me to assist him in serving the Champagne. I tried with limited success to make small talk with Angelina’s grandparents—evidently they were somewhat overwhelmed by where they were and the company they were keeping. Finally the lights flicked a couple of times, indicating that the performance would soon begin, so we went from the anteroom into the box itself and took our seats. Father and Angelina occupied a pair of large and extremely comfortable-looking chairs in the front of the box, and the rest of us took the four remaining chairs which, although slightly smaller, were probably no less comfortable. Eventually, the house lights

dimmed and Tom walked out onto the stage, trailed by Noah. He slid onto the bench, made himself comfortable, and the performance began.

He played a varied program of organ works by a number of composers, including Bach and Mozart. I particularly enjoyed hearing for the second time that day the "*Prelude et fugue sur le nom d'Alain*," which was a tribute to a young organist/composer named Jehan Alain, who had been killed in the early days of World War II. Before the Durufle piece, he played Alain's most famous work, entitled "Litanies," which was interesting because the theme from that work was picked up in the Durufle prelude that followed. The first half of the program ended, as the program last year had done, with an improvisation on a telephone number. This time, when Tom asked for a show of hands, he selected an elderly lady to provide her telephone number. As before, Noah stood in front of a large easel and converted the numbers to notes as the woman recited them. Tom went back to the console, slid onto the bench, and played each note in succession—doing so over and over again a few times until the notes morphed into a tune. Then he took off with the tune and ran with it for several minutes, turning it upside down and inside out with variations. When it was over, the audience responded loudly and lengthily. He was called back for a couple of bows before the house lights came on.

Father invited us to have more Champagne, so we returned to the anteroom and did so. Angelina and her grandmother excused themselves to visit the ladies' room, and I asked her grandfather if he needed any assistance in that area.

"Thank you for asking, Signor Conte," he said, "but I still have the bladder capacity of a young man, even if some other parts of my body don't work as well as they once did."

Somehow, the simple act of offering assistance seemed to break the ice with him, and he chatted amiably with Father, Dani, and myself until the ladies returned. They had just enough time to finish their drinks before we got the signal to return to our seats. When the house lights dimmed, Dr. Tristan Ashton-Payne, head of the music school, walked onto the stage carrying a microphone.

He publicly thanked *il Duca* for his generosity in funding the new trumpets in honor of his bride-to-be and asked Father to stand and be acknowledged. Mercifully, he refrained from doing the same thing to me—at the dedicatory concert he had publicly thanked me for bringing Dr. Foster to his attention, and I'd been forced to stand and be acknowledged—which wasn't my favorite thing to do.

"The first piece performed in the second half of this concert," Tristan

said, “will feature the first public performance of the new trumpets. Dr. Foster will be assisted on the tympani by Signor Mario Garibaldi, who has just graduated from the music school.”

He called Tom and Signor Garibaldi to the stage, shook their hands, and exited stage left. Spotlights shone on the set of tympani (consisting of four kettledrums and what looked like a pair of cymbals mounted on a stand), on the organ console, and on the trumpet pipes protruding from the both ends of the hall.

The first piece was “Fanfare for the Common Man” by the American composer Aaron Copland. Tom slid onto the bench, Noah positioned himself to Tom’s right, and the tympanist took a seat inside the semicircle of kettledrums. Tom gave him an almost imperceptible nod, and he began to play the slow and solemn opening drumbeats of the piece. When the first simple trumpet notes sounded, they sent chills down my spine. When the piece ended, I felt that it was truly amazing to contemplate how a little over three minutes of relatively simple music could be so very effective. When the last echo of the final note died, Tom slid off the bench, walked over to the tympani, and shook hands solemnly with the young man before they left the stage together. They shook hands again during the young man’s final curtain call, and then Tom returned to the bench. For the next hour Tom played pieces by various composers, including the one he’d composed in honor of the new trumpets, all of which featured the trumpets in one way or another. The performance of his own piece was, according to the program, its world premiere. When it was over, the audience demanded encores, which Tom graciously provided.

Father invited us to polish off the remaining Champagne while we waited for the crowd to clear, so we sat, sipped, and visited with Angelina’s grandparents. Signora Traverso was particularly effusive in her praise of the music. “I have never heard anything quite so amazing,” she said, “and I certainly didn’t know that pipe organs could sound so grand. The performer is so young....”

“Dr. Foster has an amazing gift,” Father said, “and I truly believe that it is a gift.”

“Tom would agree with you, Father,” I said. “He told me that the title of his doctoral thesis was ‘Improvisation—art form or mere mechanics’, or words to that effect.”

“Marco,” Father said, “be sure you tell Dr. Foster that he and his partner are invited to my apartment for a late supper.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I said. “If you will excuse us, Dani and I will go



backstage and accompany our guests back to the castle.”

“You boys run along,” Father said. “We will see you at the castle after a while.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Dani and I made our way backstage, where we found Tom surrounded by admirers, patiently talking to people and autographing their programs for them. We stood by offering moral support until the last well-wisher had left the area clutching his signed program.

“Ready to eat, guys?” I said.

“You bet we are,” Tom said, “right, Noah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Then let’s get out of here,” I said. “Give me a minute to call Sal, and the car will be at the side entrance by the time we get there.”

“Is your father going to have the same sort of feast he had last year?” Tom said as we rode the elevator up to the ducal apartment.

“He hasn’t really confided in me,” I said, “but I wouldn’t be surprised, especially given the occasion.”

We discovered, once we were inside the Ducal residence, that Father’s people had outdone themselves. There were two long tables fairly groaning under the weight of all manner of finger foods, sliced meats, cheese, sandwich material, and salad. When Father spotted us, he took a utensil and tapped his Champagne flute with it for attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said when the crowd quieted down, “I offer a toast to tonight’s artist, Dr. Thomas Foster.”

It took us nearly two hours to eat and mingle, then politely extricate ourselves from the people whom Father had invited, but we were finally able to go back to the elevators, ride down to the passageway, and walk back to our building.

“I’m guessing that none of us need a nightcap,” I said as I locked the apartment door behind us.

“Are you kidding?” Noah said. “I’ve already had more Champagne tonight than I need.”

“Good night, all,” Tom said. “I’m just glad it’s an afternoon wedding.”

“You aren’t the only one,” I said. “See you guys in the morning.”

## CHAPTER 5

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### *Marco*

DANI and I slept late Sunday morning, as did our guests, and Lucia somehow managed to keep the boys much quieter than usual. We combined a late breakfast with an early lunch and, dressed in our wedding finery, arrived at St. Mary's Anglican Cathedral with half an hour to spare. As cathedrals go, the building wasn't very impressive—it was basically a medium-sized Anglican church which had been elevated to cathedral status in recent years. Despite its proximity to and historic ties with Italy, Aragoni was not predominantly Roman Catholic, primarily because there were so many residents from other countries who had established churches to accommodate their own beliefs and needs.

"Father, you're going to outshine the bride," I said when I walked into the anteroom where he was waiting. He was decked out in an even fancier version of what we referred to as his "Student Prince" outfit, complete with a wide blue sash that ran across his chest at an angle.

"It is ridiculous, is it not?" Father said. "But the people of this country are 'my' people, and it is what they expect to see. I consider it a small sacrifice to make if it pleases my subjects."

"That's right," I said. "I guess they really are your subjects, aren't they?"

"Not really, but that is how many of them perceive themselves, and you know what they say."

"Perception is reality."

"Just so," he said.

The Dean of the Cathedral joined us, accompanied by the Roman Catholic priest who was to assist in the ceremony. We sat quietly, listening to

the music which filtered down the hall from the church proper. The music stopped, and the Dean said, "Gentlemen, it's time."

Father and I dutifully followed the two clergymen down a short hallway and into the sanctuary, where we stood as we had been instructed to do at the rehearsal. The processional music began and the bridesmaids appeared at the rear of the church and began to walk down the aisle. My heart skipped a beat as I watched Dani escort Angelina down the aisle. His tuxedo fit him like a glove, emphasizing his broad shoulders and narrow hips, and even after nearly fifteen years it never ceased to amaze me that he was all mine.

The bride wore a gown with an enormous skirt—luckily the church had a wide center aisle. The top was sleeveless, and she wore a lace jacket that extended to just below the bust line. The top was very flattering—it was gathered to fit her body's curves perfectly on the top, and then a large amount of material was gathered at the hips, forming a swag of fabric which hung down to right above her knees. What really caught the eye was the ornate crystal brooch at the top of the hip where the swag was attached. Her hair was piled high with soft curls and finished off with a long sheer veil accented with crystals.

Instead of choosing antique jewelry to wear, Angelina had elected to once again promote her favorite jewelry artisan. His name was already being mentioned in certain circles, and this set of jewelry would certainly add to his reputation. Once again, the theme was taken from nature. Her necklace consisted of a platinum vine accented with perfect white diamonds. Small diamond-accented platinum vines hung from her ears and on her wrist, and a narrow platinum and diamond vine headband shone in her hair. Rather than a bouquet of flowers, she carried an ancient Bible and rosary.

Most weddings are mercifully brief, and this one was no exception. Noah had sung an appropriate solo before the ceremony began, and he sang another solo between two sections of the service. The Dean pronounced the happy couple man and wife, they kissed, and the recessional began. While we were waiting to be summoned for photographs, Dani and I walked over to the organ console to talk to Tom. Noah was seated beside him on the bench, and Gianni was standing beside the console carrying on a conversation with Tom about organs.

"I guess this little organ with only three keyboards is quite a come-down after performing on the largest pipe organ in Europe last night," I said to Tom.

"Not at all, Marco. This little organ is a genuine Father Willis organ—it

dates back to the late nineteenth century and is an amazing instrument.”

“Father Willis?” I parroted.

“Henry Willis,” Tom said, “was the preeminent organ builder in England during the last half of the nineteenth century. He was widely known as ‘Father’ Willis because of his numerous contributions to the art of organ building, and to differentiate him from his many descendants. He installed organs all over the UK, Europe, and other places. The firm exists to this day, although the fourth generation of his descendants sold the company a decade ago or thereabouts.”

“Yeah,” Noah said, “the only genuine Father Willis organ in the United States is in a little Episcopal church in my home town. It only has two manuals, but Tom has played it several times and recorded a CD playing it.”

“Are you going to record this organ too?” Dani said.

“I’d love to do just that, if it could be arranged.”

“How much access time do you need?” I said.

“A couple of days would be nice. Three would be better.”

“I don’t think there’s very much scheduled in the sanctuary for the next few days,” Gianni said, “other than a couple of early-morning masses.”

“We really don’t have to be home until Thursday evening,” Noah said.

“Then we’ll just have to make it happen, won’t we?” I said.

“If you need a sweetener,” Tom said, “to convince the church officials to allow me the time in the building, I’ll donate a bunch of the CDs to them—they can sell them in their gift shop.”

Our conversation ceased when Dani and I were summoned by the photographer’s assistant. After everyone had posed for what seemed like hundreds of pictures and the bride and groom retired to the castle to change for the wedding feast, I took advantage of everyone’s momentary confusion and asked Dean Breckinridge if I might have a word with him in private.

“Certainly, my boy,” he said. “Let’s pop into my office before someone has an urgent need for my advice.”

As I followed the Dean out of the sanctuary, I waved at Tom and Gianni, saying, “You, too, Dr. Foster and Gianni.”

“I’ll stay and help Noah gather up the music,” Dani said.

The Dean escorted us into his office and offered us seats. “What can I

do for you, Conte Marco?" he said.

"Dr. Foster is quite taken with the cathedral's pipe organ," I said, "and would like to arrange time on it for a few recording sessions."

"Really? I didn't realize our organ was that unique."

"It's a Father Willis organ, Sir," Tom said, "and more to the point, Gianni tells me that it's never been modified. It has been renovated a few times over the last hundred years or so, but nobody has made any tonal changes to it."

"Is that unusual?" the Dean said.

"Oh my, yes. Pipe organs can last for several hundred years with proper maintenance. Unfortunately, tastes change, and sometimes the local organist and/or music committees can't resist the urge to significantly alter the sound of the organ, or sometimes to just put their own stamp on it simply because they can, so to speak. Then thirty or forty years later when it's time to once again perform major maintenance, the people in charge spend a considerable amount of money restoring the instrument to its original specifications. To find an historic organ with its original sound unchanged is significant."

"How much time at the console do you need?" the Dean said.

Dean Breckinridge was a sharp negotiator, but so was Tom, and it only took them a few minutes to strike a deal which gave Tom virtually unlimited access to the organ for the next three days. The cathedral, for its part, would receive a specific number of CDs for free and additional copies at a set price.

As we walked back to the sanctuary, I said, "You've cut this kind of deal before, haven't you, Tom?"

"Yeah. Several times," he said.

"All I can say is 'more power to you', and if there's anything Dani and I can do to assist you, you have only to ask."

"Thanks, Marco, but Noah and I have been down this path many times, so we'll get it handled."

"Still," I said, "if you need to get around, Sal or one of his people will be at your disposal."

"Thanks," he said.

"If you guys ever come to Florida," Noah said, "you'll always have a place to stay."

"True," Tom said, "and we're only a couple of hours away from Disney

World.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” I said. “We just might take you up on that when the boys are a few years older.”

The wedding feast was held under huge tents which had been set up in the parkland around the castle. Several hundred guests, mostly family members and a few officials from the city, had been invited to the sit-down meal, and hundreds more came from the city just to wish il Duca and his bride well—word having quickly spread that the drinks were free.

After a couple of hours, I said, “Dani, I’m ready to go back to our apartment. This is gonna go on for days.”

“Yeah, but we’ve got to stay at least until your father and Angelina leave.”

“Damn, I hate it when you’re right,” I said.

“Relax, have another glass of Champagne, and go with the flow.”

“Go with the flow?” I parroted. “You sound like some sort of latter-day hippie when you say things like that.”

“Come on,” he said, ignoring my jibe. “I just spotted Andreas and Nick—let’s go talk to them for a while.”

We visited with Andreas, Nick, and a few other people until a surge of excitement in the crowd told us that the newlyweds were about to depart. Dani and I quickly worked our way through the crowd to say farewell to Father and Angelina, and as soon as they departed, so did we.

“I know what I need,” I said as we changed into shorts and polo shirts.

“A nice long soak?” he said.

“You bet.”

“Why don’t we take the boys with us, so Lucia can have the evening off?” he said.

“We’ll have to take turns in the *calidarium*.”

“So?”

“You’re on.”

The boys had been taught to swim almost before they could walk and were very much at home in the water. We preferred that they swim in the *tepidarium*, so one of us would supervise them in that pool while the other enjoyed a soak in the *calidarium*. Dani and I would switch places every

twenty or thirty minutes. When we arrived at the baths with the boys in tow, we found our guests lounging in the *tepidarium*.

“Need any help?” Tom said.

“Well,” I said, “now that you mention it....”

Dani and I flipped a coin to see who went first; I lost, so I got the boys situated in the *tepidarium* while Dani went to the warmest pool.

“Those little guys swim like fish,” Noah said as he watched the boys.

“Yeah,” I said, “they learned to swim almost before they could walk, but we couldn’t bring them down here until recently.”

“Why not?” Tom said.

“Can’t run the risk of small children having an accident in the pool, so we waited until they were well past the potty-training stage.”

“Where’d they learn to swim, then?” Noah said.

“There’s a health club attached to one of the other buildings—it has a heated pool and a specified time for baby classes, during which the babies are required to wear special ‘swim’ diapers.”

I settled back on the bench and watched the boys splashing around. Both Tom and Noah seemed to be getting a kick out of playing with them in the pool. “Ready for the hot water?” Dani asked from behind me.

“Is it that time already?”

“Just about, so go ahead. Looks like the boys are being taken care of.”

“Yeah.”

He took my place on the bench—which ran around the perimeter of the pool and allowed you to sit back in the water and rest your head against the edge of the pool—and I went over to the *calidarium* and sank gratefully into the hot water, keeping an eye on one of the large clocks that were found on each wall. When my time was up, I went back to where both Dani and our guests were playing with the boys.

“I’m done,” I said.

“So are they,” Dani said. “I think by the time we get them showered, dressed, and upstairs, they’ll be ready for food and bed.”

“Works for me.”

Actually, by the time we got back upstairs, fixed something for the boys to eat, and put them to bed, we were pretty much ready for bed ourselves. We

sat sipping glasses of wine with our guests until everyone was beginning to nod and talk about calling it a night.

“We need to do one thing before we retire, Tom,” I said.

“What?” he said.

“Let’s go to the den, get on the computer, and look at a calendar—I need to get your old departure date canceled and your new one worked into the schedule.”

“I hadn’t even thought about that,” he said. “Will it be a problem?”

“I don’t think so. There’ll be a lot of flights out of here over the next couple of days, but by Thursday things should be back to normal.”

Mission accomplished, we said good night to our guests and went to take a peek at the boys, who were out cold. Lucia came home just as we were going to bed.

“Is everything all right?” she said.

“Absolutely,” I said. “We wore them out in the baths, fed them, and put them to bed.”

“Yeah,” Dani said, “you could have stayed out all night if you wanted to.”

“You know I don’t do that,” she said, “I just visited some people I go to school with.”

“I haven’t asked you this in a while,” I said, “but are there any young men on the horizon?”

“Not now. I won’t have time for that until I finish my education.”

“Nothing wrong with having goals,” I said. “More power to you.”

Starting Monday morning, Tom and Noah went to the cathedral every day just in time for the early mass to be finished and spent the rest of the day in recording sessions. Before they left Wednesday morning, I asked Tom how it was going.

“It goes,” he said, “but the final recording is going to require a lot of editing.”

“Really?” I said. “You mean you don’t just sit down and play a piece through while recording it?”

“If only that were possible. Sometimes outside noises intrude; sometimes people intrude; and sometimes the playing doesn’t go as well as I



would like. All of the above require that I start over, if not from the beginning of the piece, at least from a point at which there is a natural break in the music.”

“On top of that,” Noah said, “he’s already recorded most of the music we brought with us on the big organ in the concert hall.”

“Yeah,” Tom said, “and that meant I had to pick the pieces for this recording very carefully.”

“He’s even borrowed some music from the organ department at the music school,” Noah said.

“Do you need to postpone your trip home?” I said.

“Not at all,” Tom said. “We’ll definitely wrap things up today. Besides, Noah and I have choir practice tomorrow evening.”

And wrap it up they did. We took our guests to Poco Wednesday evening for a late dinner, and Tom waxed enthusiastic about the recordings he had made in just three days. “I’m glad everything went so well,” I said.

“Me too,” Tom said, “and you guys made it all possible.”

“Yeah,” Noah said, “this has been a great trip. What time is our flight in the morning?”

“Early,” I said. “Very early. We’re gonna take you to the airport on our way to work in the morning, and we’re going to work an hour early.”

“That’s what I thought,” Noah said. “We’ll have to pack before we go to bed.”

“Let’s focus on enjoying the evening, babe,” Tom said.

“Yeah, let’s,” Noah said. “By the way, Marco, where did the Duke and Angelina go for their honeymoon—that is, if it’s not a secret.”

“They’re at a villa on one of the Greek islands,” I said.

“For how long?”

“Just a couple of weeks. After that, they’re going to slip back into Aragoni as quietly as possible and spend two more weeks in our house on the mountain. The original plan had been to tour Europe, but they finally decided against doing that.”

“Yeah,” Dani said, “and that’s a huge secret. Nobody but us will know they’re back, which will give them some quiet time together—as far as anybody knows, they’re traveling.”

“That’s cool,” Noah said.

“And necessary,” I said. “When Father is in residence in the castle, or for that matter the Duchy, his time is almost never his own—there’s always someone or something demanding his attention.”

“So who runs things in his absence?” Tom said.

“The Council runs things,” I said, “and unfortunately, Father has delegated me to chair it in his absence.”

“Marco’s favorite thing is sitting through long, boring Council sessions,” Dani said.

“Stop talking,” I said, “or I’m gonna eat your tiramisu for you.”

The next morning we took our guests to the airport and waited until the plane was in the air before we went to work.

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CHAPTER 6

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*Dani*

MARCO and I watched the plane carrying our guests back to Florida until it was out of sight.

“Time to go to work, babe,” Marco said.

“Yeah,” I said, “duty calls.”

The ever-present Sal dropped us off at the hospital entrance and asked if we needed a ride home that evening. “We’ll take the tram, Sal,” Marco said.

“I’ll have someone drive me to the hospital so I can ride with you,” Sal said.

“Are we back to that again?” Marco said.

“Not back to it, Conte Marco,” Sal said, “you can’t go back to something you never left.”

“Well, if you’re gonna come back, you might as well plan to drive us home.”

“Yes, Sir,” Sal said.

The rest of the week went smoothly, and we were looking forward to a quiet weekend—not that we hadn’t enjoyed having Tom and Noah stay with us—but it was not to be. Marco’s cell phone rang five minutes after we got home from the hospital Friday.

“Hello,” Marco said. ... “Stefano, good to hear from you. What can I do for you? ... Really? ... Eight o’clock? ... We’ll be there. Do I need to bring anything with me? ... Thanks, see you in the morning.”

He closed the cell phone with a snap that told me he was annoyed, and I looked a question at him. “That was Stefano,” he said.

“So I gathered. Tell me again who he is.”

“Stefano Argenti is one of my numerous half-brothers—I think you’ve met him a couple of times.”

“Probably. What did he want?”

“He’s running the investigation.”

“What investigation?” I said.

“The one that’s trying to locate Angelina’s family on her mother’s side.”

“And? No, belay that. Just cut to the chase and tell me where we’re going at eight tomorrow morning.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere,” he said, “if you don’t want to, but I’m going to the extreme south of Italy with the team.”

“Of course *we* will go,” I said. “Don’t be foolish.”

“Great.”

“Do we need to pack?” I said.

“Yes, we may have to spend the night near Catanzaro.”

“Where?” I said.

“Catanzaro—it’s the regional capital of Calabria, and has a population of just under one hundred thousand. Picture the Italian boot—Calabria covers the toe.”

“We can’t just fly into Catanzaro in the morning and fly home that evening?”

“No,” he said. “Calabria is a very mountainous region, and our ultimate destination is a few hours up in the mountains from the city.”

“Okay, overnight bags it is. What else can you tell me?”

“Not much. Stefano will brief us during the flight.”

“Just Stefano?” I said.

“Two members of his team will be waiting for us in Catanzaro.”

“How long will the flight be?”

“Between two and three hours from takeoff to landing—it’s less than a thousand miles from here.”

“Isn’t this Lucia’s weekend off?” I said.

“Shit. I forgot about that, and I’m not about to ask her to change her plans—she’s been too good about being tied down to our schedule.”

“I have a suggestion.”

“Are you gonna keep it a secret?” he said.

“Any reason why Gert can’t pinch-hit for Lucia?”

“Damn! Why didn’t I think of that? I’ll call her right now.”

He whipped out his cell phone and punched a few buttons. “Hi, Gert,” he said. After listening for a moment, he said, “It was a nice event, wasn’t it? ... Listen, Gert, we need a favor. ...”

“She has no plans for the weekend, so she’ll be here by bedtime,” he said when he had put the phone back in his pocket.

Lucia came through the front door with all three boys in tow, or, more accurately, it looked as though they had her in tow, straining on their leashes as they were. She turned them loose the minute she closed the door, and they hurried over to where we were sitting.

“We’ll take care of feeding them, Lucia,” Marco said.

“Yeah,” I said, “you run along and enjoy your weekend.”

She went to her room, only to emerge a minute or two later carrying an overnight bag. She called the boys over to say goodbye to them and departed.

“She was in a hurry,” I said.

“I think she and her girlfriends are going out with some other friends,” Marco said.

“Yeah, and maybe she was afraid to hang around and get trapped here—it certainly has happened before.”

“Yeah.”

“All right, guys,” I said to the boys in English, “who wants pizza for dinner?”

A chorus of little voices answered, “Me.”

“Papa Marco will order it, and while we’re waiting for the pizza to get here, I need all three of you in the bathroom right now.”

The three boys literally ran to their room, and by the time I caught up with them, they were naked. The lure of pizza kept them from playing in the tub as they usually did, and they were bathed, toweled dry, and dressed for bed in a very short time.

“Okay, guys,” I said, “let’s go back to the kitchen.”

Again the tribe rushed ahead of me, and by the time I reached the kitchen table, they were already climbing into their respective highchairs.

“Pizza is a powerful motive, isn’t it?” Marco said.

“Evidently.”

The sound of chimes announced someone at the door, and Marco went to answer it. He returned a couple of minutes later with two boxes—one large and one medium-sized. Between the two of us, we got slices of pizza on plates and in front of the boys in minutes, then we poured them glasses of juice. Once they were absorbed in the process of eating, we settled down to enjoy our pizza along with some wine.

“Lucia must have worn them out in the park this afternoon,” I said.

“Yeah, they haven’t quite finished eating and they’re already nodding.”

“Good thing they’re already dressed for bed.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Using the washcloth I had brought with me from the bathroom, I washed each boy’s face in turn, and Marco carried them to bed after I finished the job. “Alone at last,” he said when he finally returned to the kitchen.

“Yeah. This has been a nice domestic evening, but it’s good to be alone—at least until the door chimes ring again. I’ll be finished with the cleanup in a minute or two.”

“And then what?” he said.

“I have one or two suggestions, but given that we don’t know precisely what time Gert will arrive....”

“The security people downstairs will have to get her on the elevator. They’ll let us know she’s on the way up,” he said.

“Let’s wait till we go to bed. We’ve got other things to do.”

“Yeah, let’s go pack our bags.”

When Gert arrived a little after ten, Marco and I were on one of the sofas in the living room—he was sitting at one end of it, and I was stretched out across the sofa with my head in his lap. “I smell pizza,” Gert said the minute she walked through the door.

“There’s some of it left, if you like,” Marco said. “It’s in the fridge, so feel free to nuke it.”

“Maybe tomorrow, if I feel the urge for a snack,” she said. “So, what’s going on?”

“What’s going on,” Marco said, “is that my father is away on his honeymoon, and I’ve been delegated to take his place on a family mission to the south of Italy.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that.”

“He’s not,” I said.

“Why? I should think you’d be honored to stand in for your father, Marco.”

“If it were just a mission, Gert, I’d agree with you, but it’s bigger than that.”

“Really?”

“He’s setting me up to take his place when he retires.”

“So?” she said.

“So! Geez, Gert, I’m just a simple doctor, and I don’t enjoy all the rigmarole that goes with being il Duca.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” she said.

“Damn straight I am.”

“Then all I can say is shame on you, Marco. As I understand the story, your father could have abandoned your mother and her bastard son thirty-some years ago when she refused to marry him. Instead, he saw to it that she was taken care of, and that you were educated in some of the best schools in the country. Am I getting through to you, Squirt?”

“Well,” Marco said, “when you put it like that....”

“Is there any other way to put it?” she said.

“Okay,” Marco said, “you’re right, but where does it say that I have to like it?”

“Babe,” I said, “it doesn’t say that anywhere. You don’t have to like it, but you do have to suck it up and deal with the situation. Your father has never in thirty-some years asked anything of you, but he has made it clear that he trusts you to do this for him.”

“Yeah,” Marco said. “Actually, he made a nice little speech at the last Council meeting.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.”

“Care to elaborate?” I said.

“I don’t remember his exact words—something to the effect that he was putting me in charge because I had a fresh viewpoint, and because he saw how I had taken charge of things when I inherited the title of il Conte di Conti.”

“There you go,” Gert said. “That about says it all.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and you’re much too old to play the part of a teenaged rebel.”

“Okay, guys. I surrender.”

“Good,” Gert said. “Now, what’s the schedule for this weekend?”

“We fly to Calabria at eight,” Marco said, “and we’ll be back sometime Sunday afternoon or evening. Lucia will be home around eight Sunday night to relieve you, if we’re not back by then.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and you know where everything is. Think you’re a match for three little tigers?”

“Damn straight I am,” she said.

“Good show,” Marco said.

“Good show?” I parroted.

“Sorry. I guess I’ve been hanging around Malcolm too much lately. He claims that his English is getting rusty, so we’ve been speaking English whenever we have a meeting.”

“How long has Dr. Sanderson lived in the Duchy?” Gert said.

“A little over thirty years,” Marco said. “Possibly more.”

“Does he ever go home to the UK?” she said.

“Not in a very long time. His siblings are in Canada and Australia, and his wife was an only child.”

“Does he have children?” she said.

“He has a son who lives in South Africa.”

“Talk about a far-flung family,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I like Dr. Sanderson,” she said. “As hospital administrators go, he’s



right up there among the best of them.”

“Yeah,” Marco said, “he is that. And he’s starting to talk about retirement—that’s another one of my problems.”

“Why?” she said.

“Guess who he wants to take his place?” Marco said.

“And you don’t want that?” she said.

“Gert,” Marco said, “I spent more than a decade preparing to become a doctor, not a paper-pusher.”

“And you can’t see yourself as an administrator?” she said.

“Maybe in twenty years, but not now.”

“Most young doctors would jump at the chance,” she said.

“Not this one.”

“Gert,” I said, changing the subject, “have you visited your family in Italy lately?”

“I spent a long weekend with them a few weeks ago.”

“How are you and the gentleman you told us about getting along?” Marco asked.

“We’re not—he found someone closer to home.”

“I’m sorry,” Marco said.

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too, but it’s ancient history. For your information, a local gentleman has taken me to dinner a couple of times.”

“Way to go, Gert,” Marco said. “Do we know him?”

“Ever been in that little wine shop in the old quarter?”

“The one around the corner from our favorite restaurant?” I said.

“That’s the one. It’s his shop.”

“Is he a trim-looking man,” Marco asked, “sort of tall with a full head of gray hair?”

“That’s him.”

“He’s waited on us more than once.”

“You should introduce yourselves,” she said.

“I tend to not do that when I’m out and about,” Marco said.

“Why,” she asked.

“He prefers to be anonymous,” I said, “rather than be known as the son of il Duca.”

“Yeah,” Marco said, “they tend to get a bit deferential when they find out who I am—I get enough of that sort of thing when we’re in Conti.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” she said.

Marco and I were beginning to yawn. “Sorry, Gert,” Marco said, “but I think it’s time Dani and I retired.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You know where everything is, and there’s a list of what the boys eat posted on the fridge.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, “or the boys.”

“You’re on,” Marco said. “Good night.”

Marco and I were up in plenty of time the next morning to help supervise the boys’ breakfast and still make it to the airport on time. His half-brother was waiting for us in the little office inside the hangar where the Gulfstream was kept. “Good morning, Marco,” Stefano said as we walked over to where he was sitting.

“Hello, Stefano,” Marco said. “I believe you’ve met my partner Dr. Rosati?”

“Once or twice, I think.”

While we shook hands I gave Stefano a quick once-over. “You resemble Marco’s other brothers,” I said.

“Yes, I do,” he said. “Father’s looks and body type seem to be dominant in all of us—it takes several generations for other characteristics to become pronounced.”

“Characteristics like Trevor’s blond hair,” Marco said.

“Just so,” Stefano said. “Are you ready to fly?”

“Absolutely,” Marco said.

“Good. As soon as the pilot levels off at cruising altitude, I’ll bring you up to date on things in Calabria.”

One of the pilots came over to where we were sitting and said, “We’re ready to leave whenever you gentlemen are.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Stefano said.

We followed him to the plane, boarded it, and waited for it to be towed out of the hangar—ten minutes later we were in the air. Not too long after that, the “fasten seat belts” sign was extinguished, and Stefano invited us to join him at a small conference table in the rear of the cabin. When we were seated, he opened his briefcase and spread a map out on the table.

“This is a topographical map of the Pollino Mountains,” Stefano said. “They’re some distance from Catanzaro, but we’re limited by the availability of airports with adequate runways.”

“We’re with you so far,” Marco said, “please continue.”

“It’s taken a lot of research,” Stefano said, “but we’ve located a number of isolated villages in the region. These villages attracted our attention when we learned that their populations were not only predominantly female, but the power structure was definitely matriarchal.”

“Yeah,” Marco said, “that make sense, given what we know about Angelina’s mother.”

“Just so,” Stefano said, “but we encountered a number of problems when we attempted to make contact. The suspicion of outsiders is even more deeply ingrained in the people of this region than it was in Sicily.”

“Now I know why your voice is so familiar,” I said. “You were involved in locating and making contact with Pietro’s family.”

On his first visit to Aragoni, Marco and I had taken Luciano, who managed Conti Group, to the baths with us. During that visit, Luciano, having noticed that most of the men were absent foreskins, had asked Marco if everyone in Aragoni was Jewish. Marco had explained that, along with the lack of an appendix, it was an inherited birth anomaly shared by male members of his family. Luciano then recalled that a friend of his in college had similar anomalies, and Marco had arranged for Pietro to come to Aragoni for a visit. Pietro was an orphan, and the Duke’s people had managed to locate the village his father was from and establish contact with the residents, including a meeting between Pietro and the father he’d never known.

“That was me,” he said. “I conducted the interview.”

“You still haven’t told me why I’m here,” Marco said.

“We’re hoping that these people will talk to you.”

“Talk to me? Why?”

“Because of your status as *il Conte di Conti*,” he said.

“Now I’m totally confused,” Marco said. “What possible difference

could that make?”

“As far as these people are concerned, we—that is, my team and I—could be anyone. As I told you, they are deeply suspicious, and unlike our visit to Sicily, I don’t have a ‘secret’ family language to throw at them. They have been shown articles from two or three newspapers, which carried the story of your elevation to that title, all of which included your picture. It is our belief that when they meet you in person they will be convinced that you are who you say you are.”

“Are you saying that someone has agreed to meet with Conte Marco?” I said.

“Indeed they have,” Stefano said.

“I have a question,” I said.

“Ask.”

“Whatever happened with the idea to write a letter to *Contessa Clara*, the advice columnist?” I said.

In an attempt to draw out Angelina’s female relatives, we had discussed writing an anonymous letter to the most widely read advice columnist in Italy. The letter would say that the writer was an orphan who had some unusual female-type problems and needed to find relatives who may have experienced similar situations.

“A letter was very carefully composed and written,” Stefano said, “and it appeared in many newspapers. There has been no response so far, but I still believe it was a very good idea.”

“Let’s get back on track,” Marco said. “I have no idea what I should say to these people when I meet with them.”

“That’s what we’re going to spend the next hour or so talking about,” Stefano said

He wasn’t kidding. He spent the rest of the flight giving Marco an intensive crash course in dealing with hostile and/or suspicious strangers and didn’t stop talking until we were advised to return to our seats and buckle up. When we disembarked from the plane, there was a Land Rover waiting for us. Stefano introduced us to the driver; we loaded our overnight bags in the cargo area and were whisked away from the airport.

“Marco,” Stefano said from the front seat, “if you have any questions about what we discussed on the plane, it will take us at least three hours to get to where we’re going.”

“Four,” the driver said, “if you want to stop for lunch.”

“That will be fine,” Stefano said. “We’re not expected at the inn until five or six.”

“Inn?” Marco parroted.

“We have rooms at an inn not too far from the villages in question. In fact, it is the only public accommodation in the area.”

“And we go from there to one of the villages?” Marco said.

“That won’t be necessary. A woman from each of the villages has been persuaded to visit the inn in the hope that Conte Marco will grant them an audience.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Marco said.

“Not at all. One more thing, Marco, and this applies to you, Danilo, as well.”

“What?” Marco said.

“When we get to the inn, there is a need for circumspection.”

“In what way?” I said.

“I’m sorry. I failed to make myself understood. We believe that the mother of the innkeeper is closely involved with the people we have come to see. She may even be related to them; we just don’t know for sure. In any case, guard what you say carefully unless you are in the privacy of your own room.”

“What about listening devices?” Marco said.

“All of our rooms will be swept at least once a day, so that will not be a problem, and I don’t think these people are sophisticated enough to have parabolic microphones pointed at your windows.”

## CHAPTER 7

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### *Marco*

WE ARRIVED at the “inn” a little before five, as it had taken much longer than predicted to navigate the many sharp curves and switchbacks in the highway through the mountains. It turned out to be more like a glorified bed-and-breakfast establishment than an inn, and Dani and I were escorted to a decent-sized room on the second floor. The room contained a pair of twin beds pushed together in the middle of the room, in the manner typical of small European hotels, and surprisingly, it was en suite.

“I suppose we’ve done better’,” Dani said, mimicking the aging actress portrayed by Geraldine Page in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. “‘God knows, we’ve done worse’.”

“Dani,” I said, “at least it’s clean and the beds look comfortable.” I sat down on one of them to demonstrate.

“Sorry,” he said, “just thought a little bit of humor was needed... and don’t you dare say ‘mighty little’.”

“Just be glad you’re with me, kiddo. I think they gave good old Conte Marco the best room in the house.”

“You think?” he said.

“Enough already. We need to put on some fresh clothes so we can go downstairs and mingle.”

“Are you gonna wear your ermine and carry your scepter?” he said.

“Fool.”

“You should at least wear a suit.”

“Now that I agree with,” I said.

Showered, shaved, and dressed in business attire, Dani and I went

downstairs to a sitting room which contained several comfortable-looking sofas and chairs. Stefano was already there, as were our driver and two other members of the team whom we did not know, which required introductions. An attractive woman who appeared to be considerably south of her fortieth birthday came into the room. Stefano stood, and we followed suit.

“*Conte Marco*,” Stefano said, “may I introduce our hostess, Maria Jammalo.”

The woman actually managed a slight curtsy as we shook hands. “I am sorry, Signor Conte,” she said, “that my son cannot be with us at the moment. He actually runs the inn now that his father is dead, but he is in the kitchen supervising the preparation of dinner for our guests.”

“Thank you, Signora,” I said. “I am certain that the meal will be worthy of his efforts.”

Wine was offered, which we graciously accepted. After my first sip, I looked at Dani and raised an eyebrow. He responded with a nod of agreement.

“This is very good,” I said.

“Thank you, Signor Conte,” she said. “Would you like to see the label?”

“Please.”

I took a careful look at the now-empty bottle when it was proffered and said, “Dani, do you have pencil and paper?”

“Give me a minute,” he said.

“Please make a note of this label when you find it.”

Our hostess looked pleased when I handed Dani the bottle. “This is very nice, Signora,” I said. “Is it local?”

“Yes, it is,” she said. “The Greeks actually brought winemaking to this region long before the Romans came, and we have a long history of producing wine. Sadly, our wines do not enjoy the reputation they deserve.”

“Why is that?” I said.

“Our wines are not widely known. We lack the capability to distribute them widely, and truth be told, our methods are not as modern or as productive as they could be.”

“The Conti Group produces fine wine in several regions of Italy,” I said, “and our people are very good at getting their wines to market. Perhaps we could enter into a mutually beneficial arrangement with one or more of the

local wineries.”

“That would be much appreciated,” she said.

“If you will provide me with names and contact information before we leave tomorrow, I will see to it that the initial contacts are made.”

“Thank you, Signor Conte,” she said, “I will do just that.”

The front door of the inn opened and three women entered the room. Suspecting they had come to meet with us, I stood, as did Stefano, Dani, and the others. Our hostess introduced us to Nunzia Pancari, Concettina Pando, and Filippa Fleno, the recognized leaders of the three nearest villages. Another bottle of wine was opened and poured for the newcomers as they settled down in the available chairs. The conversation wandered all over the landscape until I thought we were never going to get to the point. Finally, one of the three women asked *the* question.

“Signor Conte,” she said, “what is your interest in our small villages?”

I looked around and asked, “Can we be overheard by anyone while we’re talking in this room?”

“My son and one helper are in the kitchen,” our hostess said, “and kitchens are very noisy, so I don’t think so.”

“We are looking for the family of this woman,” I said. Stefano handed me several copies of the wedding photograph of Angelina’s parents, and I passed them around the room.

“Who is she?” our hostess said.

“When she was married, she gave her name as Filomina Nuzzi from Rome,” I said, “but those names cannot be verified.”

“What does that mean?” one of the women said.

“The name has been proven to be false, and since she died in an accident more than twenty years ago, we are unable to interview her. All the available evidence indicates that she was from this area of Italy.”

“And why are you so interested in this woman?” one of them said.

“Because her daughter just married my father,” Marco said.

Stefano again handed me a number of pictures—wedding pictures showing Father and Angelina and the wedding party, which included Dani and myself. I passed them around the group as before.

“And your father is?” one woman said.

“My father is *Il Duca d’Aragoni*, and his bride, whose name is



Angelina, would like to know her family. She was raised as an orphan from the age of three and doesn't remember her mother."

"If you will remember, Signora," Stefano said, "the newspaper articles we gave you mentioned the name of Conte Marco's father."

"That is true," one woman said. "I had forgotten."

*Okay, Marco, it's now or never.* I took a deep breath and said, "My father's bride is particularly interested in finding female members of her family because she has some unusual physical problems. It is her hope that these problems are an inherited trait, and she can learn more about them from family members."

"I am a doctor. I practice medicine in *l'Ospedale d'Aragoni*, and Angelina consulted me about her problems last year. She wants very badly to have children, but her monthly flows only occur during a six-month period every five years. In addition, she has two birth anomalies—she was born without an appendix and without a tiny portion of her external female organs."

I was watching the women as best I could, given that they were spread around the room, and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I saw sparks of recognition and interest. "Are you familiar with the term DNA?" I said.

Heads nodded.

"Angelina carries five genes that are by no means unique in the general population, but, as far as we can learn, nowhere in the world do these five genes appear in the same individuals—except for my father's male relatives. In addition, Angelina has two genes that are totally unique and cannot be found anywhere. This led us to exhume her mother's body and examine her bones. She carried the same unique DNA as Angelina. Also, radiocarbon dating of the bones indicated that Angelina's mother was approximately two hundred years old when she died."

I paused to let all that information sink in, and I sensed considerable interest around the room.

"You say that your father's family have these same five genes?" one woman said.

"Only the male members in a direct line of descent," I said. "One more thing, the male members of my father's family also have two birth anomalies—they are born without an appendix and without a prepuce."

"Prepuce?" one of them parroted.

"It's the scientific term for foreskin," I said. "There is another parallel between my family and that of Angelina—we are only fertile for roughly six months every five years."

"How is it that your father was able to marry this young woman?" one of them said. "Is he a widower?"

I looked at Stefano, and he nodded almost imperceptibly so I said, "My father has outlived many wives during a lifetime that has spanned over two thousand years."

The collective intake of breath which occurred after I dropped that bombshell was unmistakable, and the women made no attempt to conceal the fact that they were exchanging glances and looks.

"Signor Conte," one of them said, "the woman in the first wedding picture you showed us is my daughter. She did not like life in these mountains and ran away when she was young. Many of our children run away like that; they see the outside world on television and it lures them out of these mountains. My daughter returned to us after a few years, but a few years later she left us again. This pattern continued until some thirty or so years ago when she ran away one last time and was never heard from again. You say she died in an accident?"

"She was living in a village near Trento and died in some sort of traffic accident. Her daughter was two or three at the time, and a kindly couple adopted her and raised her as their own."

"Where was her husband, the baby's father?" she said.

I told them the story that we had learned from the interviews, concluding by saying, "The night before the village priest was scheduled to exorcise the alleged evil spirits from Angelina's mother, she ran away, taking her infant daughter with her. Her husband eventually gave up searching for her and moved away. Ultimately, he had the marriage annulled on grounds of desertion and remarried.

"Signor Conte," one of them said, "may I ask how old you are?"

"Certainly. I will be thirty-five on my next birthday, but this gentleman"—I pointed at Stefano—"is my half-brother, and he is somewhat older."

"That's an understatement," Stefano said. "I was born in the years preceding the final collapse of Rome."

"And where was your father born?" one of them said.

“My father was born Marcus Claudius Sabinus,” I said, “which should say something about his family history.”

“That it does,” our hostess, who had been quiet through the entire conversation, said. “I was born shortly before Augustus became Emperor of Rome. The name given me at birth was Servia Lartius Furia, and my grandmother was from the same part of the Italian peninsula as your father. Sadly, neither she nor my mother survived the fall of Rome.”

“I am very sorry to hear that,” I said. “My father has many tales to tell regarding family members who did not survive those difficult times.”

“What exactly do you want from us?” she said.

“To begin with, Angelina would like to get to know her family,” I said. “In addition, there are many male members of my father’s family who would like very much to meet and possibly marry women whom they will not outlive. In exchange, we can offer financial help with wine production and other things the people in your villages might be in need of. It is our hope and belief that when my father and his bride have children, their children—of both sexes—will have long lives.”

“How can you know this?” our hostess said.

“We cannot know it, Signora, but all the available scientific evidence suggests that it will be the case. Ask me that question again in a few years and I will have a better answer, based on the DNA of their children. Actually, you probably won’t have to wait that long—by her calculations, Angelina’s next fertile period will be later this year.”

“And if it doesn’t coincide with her husband’s fertile period, what then?” one of them said.

“As it happens, we are not exactly infertile all the time; we simply have low sperm counts. There are ways to deal with that problem.”

“Are you, Signor Conte,” our hostess said, “one of those men who is looking for a wife who will live as long as he does?”

“No, Signora, I am not. Dr. Rosati has been my friend, companion, and partner for fifteen years, and I could ask for nothing else.”

“I thought so,” she said, “I have been studying your... how do you say it, body language?”

“You are very observant,” I said.

“When I was young, same-sex pairings were not uncommon in Rome, and my continued survival has required that I be extremely observant. I would

like to meet your father. Can that be arranged?"

"Absolutely," I said, "just as soon as he and Angelina return from their wedding trip."

"Marco," Stefano said, "that's three weeks from now."

"Not quite. When their time in the Greek Isles is up, Father and Angelina are planning to slip quietly back into Aragoni and spend a couple of undisturbed weeks in our house up on the mountain. I don't think he would consider a visit from our hostess and Angelina's grandmother as an invasion of privacy, and I'm certain that Angelina wouldn't."

"Good," he said, "I'll plan accordingly."

"Please don't tell anyone else where they'll be. He doesn't get many opportunities for total privacy in the Duchy."

"Marco, you have my word on that."

A maid entered the room and announced that our dinner was ready, so we followed our hostess and the other women into the dining room, where a huge table was overflowing with food. The dinner conversation was of necessity circumspect due to the presence of the maid, but we went back to the sitting area and visited with our hostess and the other women for a while after dinner.

During a lull in the conversation, I asked our hostess a question about the survival of her family when Rome fell. "It was a difficult time for all Romans," she said, "and ten times more difficult for single women. Unless she was a patrician, a woman without a husband or other male protector was quite vulnerable. Many members of my family survived solely because my grandmother arranged marriages for them with powerful men. Unfortunately, not all of their husbands were smart enough to escape the chaos."

"There was an item in the newspapers last year," one of the women said. "A letter to *Contessa Clara* from a woman claiming to have unusual female problems. Were you people responsible for that?"

"Yes, Signora, we were," I said.

"We discussed that letter for months, and came very close to responding to it, but finally decided not to do so."

An hour or so after dinner, the three women had to return to their villages, but before they did so, arrangements for further contact and conversations were made with the team members who were staying behind. As soon as we finished breakfast the next morning, we boarded the Land

Rover and headed back to the airport. We were all lost in thought as we boarded the plane, and the silence wasn't broken until we were at cruising altitude.

"Stefano," I said, "I can't quite shake the feeling that things went too smoothly and quickly last night. What do you think?"

"I've been through this sort of thing half a dozen times over several decades," he said, "and each one was a little different. The discussions can drag out for days, or they can come to a head very quickly, as we saw last night. In this case, I think the women were particularly receptive to an offer of outside help for their economic problems, and that simple fact was driving them."

"I think I'll wait until the rest of the team reports back to you before I contact Father," I said.

"You can do that?" Stefano said.

"Fortunately, yes. Since I'm taking his place on the Council for a month, I needed a way to make contact in an emergency. Although this certainly doesn't qualify as an emergency, it is high enough on his list of priorities to rate a call."

"I understand. The last time I stood in for Father on the Council the telephone hadn't been invented, so I had to rely on a fast messenger."

"Have you ever served as Duke after Father retired?" I said.

"Twice."

"Marco is afraid the Duke is going to ask him to do that in a few years," Dani said.

"Don't worry about it, Marco," Stefano said, "it's not that bad."

"I was surprised," Dani said, "when Angelina's grandmother and the other women gave me bits of hair for testing."

"Dani," I said, "it was clear, very early in the evening, that the women trusted us, especially when our hostess revealed the fact that she was sort of the matriarch of the clan."

"Yeah," he said, "I did pick up on that, and I'll do the DNA testing first thing Monday morning."

"I wonder," I said, "if there are more females out there who are related to that family, but don't know it?"

"Yeah," Dani said, "there could be more Angelinas out there waiting to

be discovered.”

“Perhaps it’s time for another letter to *Contessa Clara*,” Stefano said.

“Why not?” I said. “The women with whom we just met read it and considered responding. A young woman who doesn’t know anything about her origins might just answer.”

When the plane was safely in its hangar in Aragoni and we were gathering our bags, I said, “We haven’t had lunch, Stefano. Would you care to join us somewhere in town?”

“Yeah,” Dani said, “once we get back to our place, the babysitter will leave and we won’t be going anywhere.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Stefano said. “Ever been to Poco?”

“It’s one of our favorite places,” I said.

We killed an hour over lunch and arrived at our door just in time to assist Gert in getting the boys settled down for a nap. Gert was delighted that we had gotten home so much earlier than expected. “My friend called earlier,” she said, “and we’re going out to dinner later.”

“Way to go, Gert,” I said.

“Everyone needs a social life,” Dani said.

We thanked Gert profusely and walked her to the door, after which we took advantage of the silence in the apartment to have a little lie-down ourselves. Two days later, I was sitting at my desk when I got a phone call from Dani. “The DNA results are in,” he said without preamble.

“And?” I said.

“Concettina Pando is definitely Angelina’s grandmother. I matched her DNA against that of both Angelina and her mother, and there’s no doubt.”

“And?”

“How did you know there was an ‘and’?” he said.

“This is me you’re talking to, babe. I can sense it.”

“Yeah, there’s an and. Our hostess at the inn, Maria Jammalo, is definitely an ancestor of the other three women and, therefore, an ancestor of Angelina as well.”

“Well done, Dani. I’ll call Stefano right now and tell him.”

“Do I get a reward?” he said.

“Ask me that question this evening when we’re alone.”

“Count on it.”

## CHAPTER 8

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### *Marco*

ARMED with the DNA confirmation from Dani and additional data that Stefano's team had obtained in Calabria, I went into the den and settled down at my desk Thursday evening after the Council meeting to call my father on his satellite phone. It took a minute or two for him to answer.

"Hello, Marco," he said.

"Good evening, Father. I trust all is well on your island."

"Absolutely. Has something important happened?"

"I think you could say that."

I spent the next several minutes telling him in some detail about our trip to Calabria and subsequent events. "That is extremely good news," he said.

"Two of the women want to meet you, and Stefano is going to make it happen while you're at our house—one of them is Angelina's grandmother."

"Very good," he said. "Just give us a couple of days' notice."

"I'm sure he will."

"Is there anything else I need to know about?"

"No, Sir," I said.

"Thank you, Marco. You have done well—Angelina will be delighted."

"Are you going to tell her now or spring it on her when it happens?"

"I am not sure—that will require some thought."

"Good night, Father."

"Goodbye, Marco, and thank you again."



"I take it the Duke was pleased with your news," Dani said from the other desk, where he was using his laptop.

"You could say that."

"You seem more energized than you usually do after a Council meeting," he said.

"Believe it or not, tonight's meeting went fairly quickly, probably because there were no long-winded debates about anything."

"Does that happen often?" he said.

"I'm told that it does—I just haven't seen it happen until now."

"Are we still going to Conti this weekend?" he said.

"Sure. Why wouldn't we?"

"Aren't we gonna be there when the ladies from Calabria visit the Duke and Angelina?"

"You bet, but that probably won't happen for a couple of weeks. Father and Angelina aren't due back until Sunday or Monday, and I'm sure Stefano will allow some time for them to get settled in before springing such important visitors on them."

"Yeah. By the way, you did send that contact information to Luciano, didn't you?" he said.

Luciano Neri was the grandson of my grandmother's brother, which made him my second cousin. When I inherited the title and the responsibilities that came with it, I had hired him to run things—he had a degree in Accounting and a Master's in Business Administration, and with him firmly in control of the Conti Group, I could get by with a monthly appearance at il Castello di Conti. At the time he was hired, Luciano had just gone through a painful divorce, but, as we later learned, he played on both teams and was currently involved with a man.

"I did it Monday. He may well have set things in motion by now," I said.

"We haven't seen him socially in a while. Are he and Izzy still an item?"

"As far as I know. Ask him yourself when we get there."

"I will," he said.

"At least we won't have to go to Siena for a while—Grandmother will

be in Conti this weekend.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot you’d heard from her.”

When we landed on the airstrip at Conti Saturday morning, Giuseppe was waiting for us with an SUV large enough to accommodate Dani, myself, and three toddlers—and Grandmother was with him.

“Look,” Dani said to the boys, “la Contessa is waiting for us with Giuseppe.”

My grandfather had been *il Conte di Conti*, and as his widow, Grandmother would be known as *la Contessa* for the rest of her life. I had not met her—had not, in fact, even known that she was alive—until Dani and I had traveled to Italy after I finished my residency, but in the years since, we had grown quite fond of her. As soon as their feet were firmly planted on the concrete taxiway, the boys spotted Grandmother and began to pull us toward her. When we reached where she and Giuseppe were standing by the SUV, I handed Giuseppe the leash I was holding (Dani had the other two), so that I could give Grandmother a hug.

“You’re looking well, Grandmother,” I said. And so she was. She was fairly tall for an Italian woman of her generation, very thin, and carried herself rather rigidly with an air of authority. As usual, she was dressed rather elegantly in black and wore a minimum of jewelry and makeup—her silver hair was worn in a chignon.

“Thank you, Marco. I get by. Hello, Dani, and look at these three boys, they are growing like the weeds in my garden.”

“Conte Marco,” Giuseppe asked, “are there any bags?”

“Only the one rolling behind me, plus my briefcase and laptop carrying case,” I said. “They’re just inside the door of the plane.”

He retrieved the bags, and the door of the plane was quickly closed. As soon as we had moved far enough away for safety, the plane taxied back to the runway and was evidently cleared for takeoff, because it was out of sight in minutes.

“Someone’s in a hurry,” Giuseppe said.

“There are four people on board,” I said, “who have an urgent need to be in Rome.”

“Shall we go?” he said.

Giuseppe helped Grandmother into the passenger seat next to him while Dani and I got the boys secured in kiddie seats in the third row, then we

settled down for the ride into Conti. Conti hadn't had an airport until Luciano discovered an abandoned World War II airstrip in the middle of our vineyards. The runways were solid concrete, and it hadn't been practical to pull them up after the war, so rehabilitating them had not been a major expense. He had persuaded a number of charter companies to include Conti on their itineraries when they conducted tours of the wine-growing regions of Italy, and merchants in the town were delighted with the influx of tourists.

When we were under way, I said, "Grandmother, how is Mama doing?"

"The same as always. Some days she is almost herself, other days she is in her own world."

My father had been traveling around Italy incognito when he met my mother during a stay in Conti. To make a long story short, they had an intense romance and she became pregnant. Without telling him what she was going to do, she told her father that she wanted to get married and why. He flew into an absolute rage, and within hours she was drugged and on an airplane to the United States. Once there, while still coming out from under the drugs, she was forcibly married to a man my grandfather knew. This man asserted his marital rights frequently and violently until a neighbor helped her seek refuge in a shelter for battered women. By the time my father's detectives located her, she had already begun to descend into a state of delusion, i.e., she withdrew into her own little world where it was safe—and stayed there.

It took less than five minutes for us to arrive at the entrance to il Castello di Conti, which sat on a hill overlooking the town. Italian castles can be more or less classified into two groups—they either resemble the medieval castles of England and France, or they appear to be slightly more recent and of a vaguely Mediterranean design. Il Castello di Conti fell into the latter group and consisted of a quadrangle surrounding an interior courtyard. We drove through the open gates into the courtyard and pulled up at the entrance, where the young woman who would be responsible for the boys was waiting for us. Giuseppe accompanied us upstairs to the apartment reserved for whoever held the title of Conte di Conti and saw us safely inside.

"I'll go put the car away, Marco," he said. "Is there anything else you'll need me for?"

"Thank you, Giuseppe," I said, "but I don't think so."

When the door closed behind Giuseppe, Dani said, "Why don't you go see Luciano and take care of business? Your grandmother and I will stay here with the tribe."

"Lunch will be served in my apartment at one," Grandmother said.

“Then Luciano and I will see you there at one.”

I walked to the wing of the building that housed the administrative offices for the Conti Group, where I found Luciano at his desk studying a stack of reports. Luciano was four or five years older than me, about my height, and had a headful of naturally curly black hair—he was also extremely good-looking. He rose, walked around the desk, and greeted me European-style.

“Marco,” he said, “you’re looking well.”

“Yeah. All that hard work and clean living will do it for anyone.”

“Have a seat and I’ll bring you up to date. There are one or two things that weren’t in the last report I sent you, and I’ve got a proposal for you to look at as well.”

It took nearly an hour for him to walk me through the detailed reports of the various subsidiaries of the Conti Group, whose assets included, among other things, vineyards and olive groves in various parts of Italy, along with a couple of wineries and an olive oil factory.

“Before I forget,” I said when he had finished, “have our people had any luck with those wine producers down in Calabria?”

“Absolutely... and that brings me to the proposal that I have for you.”

“I’m all ears,” I said.

“We’ve generated a considerable surplus over the past two years, and I want to use most of it to purchase a wine wholesaler.”

“Tell me about it.”

“They’re based in Rome, well-established within the industry, and they already have exclusive rights to distribute several popular labels. More to the point, the price is right.”

“Why?” I said.

“The founder of the company died somewhat unexpectedly, and there were no plans in place for keeping the business going. There are three heirs, and all they want is to take the money and run.”

He handed me a document, saying, “Here’s a quick one-page summary. If you want more information, I’ve got a file drawer full of it.”

I quickly scanned the proffered document.

“Having exclusive rights to distribute a number of labels from Calabria

will expand the portfolio of this company very nicely,” he said.

“Do it,” I said.

“Just like that?” he said.

“You know me, Luciano—I tend to make up my mind fairly quickly. If the reality is half as good as the proposal, we should do very well.”

“Do you think your new contacts in Calabria can get us in the door with other wine producers down there?” he said.

“I should think so, as long as they think we’re treating them right. As it happens, Angelina’s closest relative will be coming to Aragoni to meet her sometime during the next two weeks. As I understand it, she’ll be escorted by a cousin, and the cousin is sort of the unofficial leader of the region. If you can fly up on short notice, I might be able to arrange a meeting.”

“I can do that; just let me know when it’s been arranged.”

“Count on it. Is there anything else? My watch tells me that it’s time to have lunch with Grandmother.”

“No, that about wraps it up,” he said.

He secured the office, and we went to the wing where Grandmother’s apartment was located. Dani was in her sitting room talking to Father Rinaldo, the local parish priest, when we got there. Grandmother summoned us to the dining table while I was shaking hands with the priest.

When Father Rinaldo finished saying grace, I said, “I guess the boys are sound asleep.”

“Out cold,” Dani said, “and as soon as they’re up and about, we’re going to take them into town and walk around the square a few times.”

“We did that the last time we were here.”

“True,” he said, “but you know how important it is to the townspeople to see the future Conte in their midst from time to time.”

“I take your point. I’ll call Giuseppe and tell him we do need him this afternoon.”

“Been there, done that,” he said.

Two hours later, we were strolling around the square in Conti making polite remarks in response to the many people who chose to stop and comment on the triplets. As we walked down a street which ended at the square, I noticed something new. “It looks like Signor Burato has enlarged the

hotel a bit," I said.

"Marco," Dani said, "adding a few tables outdoors under umbrellas is hardly enlarging the building."

"Don't be a smarty; you know very well that what I meant to say was he's enlarged his business."

"True," he said.

We selected one of the tables and sat down. When the waitress appeared, we ordered wine for ourselves and fruit juice for the boys, and when she returned with our drinks, our host was with her. "Signora Contessa, Signor Conte, and Dr. Rosati," he said. "You honor my poor establishment with your presence."

"Business must be good, Signor Burato," I said. "You have expanded it a little."

"Business is very good. The tourists who come to see the wine country have discovered that Conti has other things to offer besides vineyards."

"I'm very glad to hear that," I said. "If the town prospers, it is good for everyone."

"So true. Tell me, which one of these little boys will be our Conte one day?"

"Marcus is the oldest," I said, patting Marcus on the head.

"He is a fine-looking little boy," the hotelier said, "but you are still a young man, so I won't live to see our next Conte assume the title."

"Nor shall I," Grandmother said, "but I am content to know that there will be someone to follow in Marco's footsteps."

"Signor Burato," Dani said, changing the subject, "have you sold all of the wine from il Castello's cellars?"

"Indeed I have, and I wish there were more of it. My friend in Rome recently told me that all the bottles he acquired have been sold as well."

While exploring the castle, Dani had discovered a treasure trove of valuable wine in a subcellar. Many previous holders of the title had consumed and/or collected fine wine, although my great-grandfather was the last Conte to have added to the collection. Sale of the wine had paid for the renovations to the castle which we made prior to opening it for tours.

"I'm sorry," Dani said, "but there isn't anything left in that cellar. Well, other than the bottles of bad wine that the tourists buy as souvenirs of il

Castello di Conti.”

“I find that amazing,” the hotelier said. “A guest in the hotel recently showed me her souvenir bottle and told me how pleased she was to have been able to purchase it.”

“Tourists will buy anything,” I said.

By the time we finished our wine, the boys were getting restless, so we decided to walk back to where Giuseppe had parked the SUV. Back at the castle we took them to the small play area that had been installed for use by children of people who were touring the castle.

“After all this excitement,” Dani said, “the boys will sleep well tonight.”

“And early,” I said.

“You think?”

“Speaking of sleep,” Grandmother said, “if you boys will excuse me, I think I will go take a nap.”

“You’ve certainly earned it,” I said. “Thank you for helping us with the boys.”

We stayed in the playground until the boys were obviously getting tired, then we herded them back inside the castle and up to our apartment. Luciano joined us for dinner in the town that evening, but Grandmother said she was too tired to go with us. We boarded the plane Sunday morning and were back home in time for lunch.

## CHAPTER 9

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### *Dani*

THE following Sunday morning, Marco and I went to the airport with Stefano to meet the plane carrying our visitors from Calabria. Maria Jammalo, who had been our hostess at the inn, was the first to descend the steps, and she was followed quickly by Angelina's grandmother, Concettina Pando. They looked at their surroundings with some bewilderment. "Where are we?" Maria Jammalo said.

"Inside a hangar," Stefano said. "The plane was towed inside and the doors have been closed. We started doing that for security reasons back during the War and never stopped."

"Welcome to Aragoni, ladies," Marco said. "This is Salvatore Alberti, who is in charge of our security."

"I thought Aragoni was a peaceful country," Maria said.

"It is," Marco said, "but shortly after I inherited the title of il Conte di Conti, there was an attempt made on my life. We've been very careful ever since that time."

Sal had been stowing our visitors' bags in the van and said, "We're ready to leave any time you are, Conte Marco."

"Thank you, Sal," Marco said. "If you ladies will board the van, we have a short drive up the mountain to our house."

As we drove up the mountain, the women seemed to be quite taken by the view.

"Have either of you visited the Alps before?" I said.

"I have only seen them from a distance," Maria said.

"I've never been outside of Calabria," Concettina said.



Sal turned off the highway and stopped at our gate. "You haven't changed the code, have you, Conte Marco?" he asked.

"Not without telling you," Marco said.

Sal punched the keypad; the gate opened and we proceeded up the defile to the house. When the women saw the full extent of the waterfall beside the house, they were appreciative of the spectacle.

"Are we expected?" Maria said.

"The Duke, Marco's father, knows we are coming," I said, "but Angelina does not—it's to be a surprise for her."

Sal pulled up under the portico at the side of the house, and we got out of the van. Marco hurried ahead of the group and rang the doorbell. The Duke opened the door and led us into the living room, where Angelina was sitting on one of the sofas. "Marco, Dani, what a surprise," she said. "And you've brought visitors with you."

"Hello, Angelina," Marco said. "I believe you know my brother Stefano?"

"Certainly," she said.

"And these ladies are from Calabria. Father, Angelina, may I present Maria Jammalo and Concettina Pando."

Hands were shaken and greetings exchanged.

"Father," Marco said, "is Sal being taken care of?"

"Yes, my security man will take care of him."

"Thank you."

Angelina was examining the two women curiously. "I'm sorry," she said, "I'm a poor hostess. Won't you have a seat?"

When everyone was seated, the Duke said, "May we offer you folks something to drink? A glass of wine, perhaps?"

We all said yes, and a bottle and glasses were produced. Over her wine glass, Angelina was still looking closely at both women, but in particular at Concettina.

"I keep thinking that you look familiar," Angelina said, "but I can't figure out why. Excuse me just a minute."

She left the room and returned a couple of minutes later carrying a framed photograph, which she handed to Concettina. "This is a picture of my

mother on her wedding day, and she sort of looks like you.”

“That’s because she was my daughter,” Concettina said.

“Your daughter? That would make you....”

“Your grandmother.”

“My grandmother! Oh, my goodness, I can hardly believe it.” She looked at Maria and said, “Are you a relative, also, Signora?”

“I am also your grandmother many generations removed,” Maria said.

Angelina was beside herself with joy. “This is the best wedding present I could possibly have, and I don’t even know who to thank.”

“Angelina,” the Duke said, “we have had people working on the mystery of your mother’s family for a long time. If you want someone to thank, thank Stefano.”

“Don’t look at me,” Stefano said. “Marco is the one who convinced these ladies to talk to us.”

“Well, thank... thank you all,” Angelina said. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Come, Grandmother, let’s go out onto the terrace, and you can tell me about my mother—I was only three when she died, and I don’t remember anything about her.”

She took her grandmother by the hand and led her from the room.

The Duke looked at Maria and said, “May I ask where you are from, Signora?”

“Did Conte Marco not tell you?” she said.

“Only in general terms.”

She responded in a language that was somehow familiar but not familiar, and both the Duke and Stefano replied in the same language.

“Whoa!” Marco said. “What language are you speaking? It sounds oddly familiar, but I’m only getting a few words here and there.”

“That is because you studied Ecclesiastical Latin in college, my boy,” his father said, “and we are speaking Latin as it was spoken in Rome—Classical Latin, if you will. The only people who study that language today are scholars who study the works of Cicero and Virgil as they were written.”

“That’s interesting,” Marco said, “and before your conversation continues, may I change the subject briefly?”

“Of course.”

“Signora,” he said, “are your people satisfied with the assistance the Conti Group has been providing them?”

“Yes, indeed. They have been very helpful.”

“I mentioned it because the Conti Group is going to purchase the wine distributorship involved, and my Managing Director would like to meet you, if that is your wish.”

“Certainly,” she said. “When, and where?”

“He will either come see you here in Aragoni, or you may stop by Conti on your way back to Calabria.”

“If he comes here, Marco,” the Duke said, “Angelina will have more time with her family.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Marco said. “Luciano is prepared to fly into Aragoni literally on a moment’s notice.”

“He sounds anxious,” the Duke said.

“He senses opportunity; wine from Calabria is not widely distributed, and he wants to get to market first and with the best.”

Our conversation was interrupted when two men entered the room—Sal and a man I did not immediately recognize. “Pardon the intrusion, Signor Duca,” the man said, “but Salvatore has urgent news for Conte Marco.”

“What is it, Sal?” Marco said.

“I just received a call from Giuseppe,” Sal said. “Word has reached Conti that Signor Nepote has escaped from custody.”

“Who?” Marco said.

“The one you have been referring to as Signor Piedmont Winery.”

“Do you know how and when this happened?” Marco said.

“It happened two or three days ago, Conte Marco. The story we have been told is that the man was being transferred from one prison to another when he escaped. It is believed that he had help from the outside and that some of his criminal friends may have been involved.”

“I want someone in il Castello with the children immediately,” Marco said, “and you’d better tell the guy who replaced you in Siena to be extra vigilant.”

“It is being done as we speak, and I have notified the security people at the hospital as well.”

“Thank you, Sal.”

Sal nodded and left the room.

“I do not know if the animosity of this man and his friends extends to me,” the Duke said to the other man, “but I think extra vigilance may be required.”

“We already have guards at the borders, airport, and train station, checking everyone who tries to leave the Duchy against the man’s picture,” the man said.

“Thank you,” Father said.

When the man had withdrawn, I noticed a puzzled look on Maria’s face. “When Marco inherited the title of Conte di Conti,” I said, “he called a meeting of the managers of the various family businesses, and he announced, among other things, that the annual audit would be conducted by a new firm. One of the men at the meeting was particularly unhappy with that announcement, and we subsequently learned that he had stolen hundreds of thousands of euros over a long period of years.”

“He got away with it,” Marco said, “because he had bribed the old auditing firm. He also had criminal connections. He was eventually sentenced to a long prison term, and we sued the auditors to recover most of the money.”

“You left out the part where he or his henchmen blew up my Learjet,” the Duke said, “thinking that you were on it.”

“Yeah,” Marco said. “We had attended a performance at La Scala and decided on the spur of the moment to take the train back to Aragoni.”

“And we’ve tended to be careful about security ever since,” I said.

“I can certainly understand why,” Maria said.

Angelina and her grandmother came back into the living room. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I became so excited about meeting my grandmother that I forgot to see about lunch.”

“It has been handled,” the Duke said. “In anticipation of this visit, I gave the cook her instructions earlier today.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ve been learning that I have half-sisters, aunts, nieces, and nephews, and it’s a bit overwhelming for someone who grew up thinking she had no family at all.”

“You have your paternal grandparents,” the Duke said.

“I know, but somehow it’s just not the same, and I can’t wait to go to

Calabria and meet some of them.”

“Angelina,” the Duke said, “I have been away from the Council for almost a month already. I am not at all certain that I can take another trip right now.”

“Can’t Marco stand in for you a little longer? You told me he was doing a wonderful job.”

“That would be up to Marco,” the Duke said, “and whether or not he can stand another week of Council meetings.”

“I don’t mind, Father,” Marco said, “especially now that I have the ability to cut off debate when it gets out of hand.”

“On the other hand,” the Duke said, “given the heightened threat to your safety, it might not be advisable for you to escort Angelina to Calabria.”

“What heightened threat?” Angelina said.

The Duke explained what had happened.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said, “that’s terrible.”

“Yeah,” Marco said, “it is that, but we’ll deal with it.”

“My dear,” the Duke said, “I think you should show our guests to their rooms so they can freshen up before lunch if they like.”

“Oh,” she said, “I’ve gotten so carried away with meeting my grandmother that I’ve totally forgotten my manners. This house actually belongs to Marco and Dani, so I really don’t know which rooms to use.”

“Any room upstairs will be fine,” Marco said.

“I haven’t told you how much I’ve enjoyed being in this house, Marco,” she said, “and Marcus is going to build us one just like it—only bigger.”

“Bigger?” he parroted.

“Yes, bigger,” she said, “because I want to fill it with children.”

“Have you selected a site, Father?” Marco said.

“It will probably be built on top of the ridge behind this house,” the Duke said, “but I want to show Angelina some other sites before we make a final decision.”

“Marco,” I said, “why don’t you and I get the ladies’ bags from the foyer and carry them upstairs?”

“Good idea.”

We retrieved the bags from the foyer and carried them upstairs to the guest rooms with Angelina and the two women following. “These are the best rooms,” Marco said, “because they’re on the side of the house where the waterfall is loudest.”

“Thank you for both of us,” Maria said.

“Lunch should be ready by the time you are,” Angelina said. “We’ll wait for you in the living room.”

We had a lively conversation over our lunch, and then Angelina popped a question. “Marco,” she asked, “when can I start taking fertility drugs?”

“Off the top of my head,” Marco said, “not until your active period begins. However, I’m an internist, not a specialist, so I’ll need to make a few inquiries.”

“Why would you want to take fertility drugs?” Concettina said.

“Because it is very unlikely that my husband and I will be in our active periods at the same time, and that will ensure a greater chance of pregnancy,” Angelina said.

“And a greater chance of multiple births,” Marco said. “Don’t leave that out of the equation.”

“I hope I have four or five babies at the same time,” she said. “The woman who bore your triplets had no problems, correct?”

“So we were told at the time.”

“That’s settled, then,” she said.

The look on the Duke’s face told me that the matter was anything but settled. After lunch, Stefano, Marco, and I excused ourselves and thanked the Duke and Angelina for lunch.

“If you are going back down the mountain,” the Duke said, “I think you need a lead car in light of the news that Salvatore just brought us.”

“But we don’t have another car with us,” Marco said.

“Wait twenty minutes and you will.”

The Duke removed a sat phone from his pocket and walked out of the room, pushing buttons as he went. When he returned to the room, he said, “It is arranged. All you need to do is wait.”

There was no arguing with the Duke when he was using *that* tone of voice, so we visited with Angelina’s guests while we waited. Almost exactly

twenty minutes later, the door chimes rang and the Duke went to the door. “All right, gentlemen,” he said when he returned, “a lead car and a follow car are waiting in the driveway.”

We went outside, got into the van, and Sal drove us back down the mountain, following the lead car. Sal and Stefano occupied the front seat of the van, I was sitting directly behind Sal, and Marco was to my right behind Stefano. About halfway down the mountain, we came to one of the several tunnels that burrowed through ridges. It was a fairly long tunnel, and as we approached the other end we saw a construction barricade and a yellow blinking light. The lead car was in the process of going around the barricade.

“I don’t remember any road repairs taking place here earlier,” Sal said, “besides which, it’s Sunday.”

“Sal,” Stefano yelled, “it’s an ambush—step on the gas.”

Sal did as instructed and approached the barricade at a fairly high speed, swerving into the left-hand lane to avoid the barricade. As we emerged from the tunnel, I saw motion in the bushes to the left; then I heard the sound of gunfire, followed by an explosion, and the world went black.

## CHAPTER 10

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### *Marco*

I BECAME aware of several dull pains in various parts of my body long before I became cognizant of my surroundings. Then there was the sensation of a bright light shining in my eye. I tried to close it, but I couldn't do so because my eye was being held open. The light went away, and it finally dawned on me that I was lying on a gurney in the trauma center at the hospital; I tried to sit up, which was a big mistake, because the room began to spin and everything seemed to hurt.

"Looks like he's coming around," a voice said.

"Go get the security guy," a second voice said.

"What happened?" I managed to croak.

"There was an explosion," voice one said, "the security people will tell you about it."

"Am I all right? Everything is sort of hazy, and I feel like I'm wandering through a fog."

"You have a slight concussion, and an assortment of bruises, contusions, and cuts," voice two said, "but other than that, yes."

"What about the others?"

"Others?" voice one said.

"Dr. Rosati, Stefano Argenti, and our driver, Salvatore Alberti."

"They're around here somewhere," voice two said, "but I don't have any information at the moment."

"Any reason why I can't go find out for myself?"

"I don't see why not," voice one said, "provided you can stand up



without falling over, but you'd look kind of silly running around the trauma center naked."

"My clothes?"

"They were cut off you, which is standard procedure, as you should know, Dr. d'Argenzio."

"I have a set of street clothes upstairs in my locker," I said.

"Which somebody will fetch for you in good time. Now lie still and let me check your vitals."

I submitted meekly while they poked, prodded, and probed. *A doctor gets a taste of his own medicine, and it isn't a whole lot of fun.*

"Let's see if you can stand up now," voice one said.

I started to sit up with an assist from someone behind me. With a few moans and groans, I slid around until I was sitting sideways on the gurney with my feet dangling.

"So far so good," voice two said. "How do you feel? Any dizziness?"

"Not at the moment. I'm going to try to stand up now," I said.

With a little assistance, I managed to slide off the gurney and stand upright, leaving the sheet behind me in the process. "We're kind of busy right now, Dr. d'Argenzio," voice two said, "and nobody has time to go to your locker. Would you settle for a set of scrubs?"

"You bet."

"Back in a minute."

The scrubs were brought to me, and a man entered the cubicle as I was pulling them on. He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place the face.

"Ah, Conte Marco," he said, "you are looking somewhat better than you did the last time I saw you."

"And that was?"

"After the gun battle," he said.

"Gun battle?"

"Sorry, let me begin again. I'm your father's security chief, Modesto Lanzano."

"Yes, of course," I said. "I remember you now. You'll have to forgive me—they say I suffered a mild concussion."

“Yes, I know,” he said.

“Is there somewhere we can talk? I want to know what happened, and more important, how everyone else fared.”

“There’s nobody in the doctor’s lounge,” voice two said, “and I’m sure you know where it is.”

“Absolutely. But first, what about the contents of my pockets? Are they in the usual spot on the shelf under the gurney?”

“Just a minute.”

A small plastic bag containing my wallet, keys, and cell phone was handed to me.

“Thanks, Dr. Jacobi,” I said.

“You finally remembered my name. That’s a good sign.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. Tell me, who’s in charge of the trauma center at the moment?” I said.

“Dr. Zaccaro.”

“Thanks, I’ll track him down to find out how my friends are doing. Follow me, Modesto—I’ll lead you to the lounge just as soon as we find Dr. Zaccaro.”

Finding Dr. Zaccaro wasn’t a problem, as he was standing outside the adjacent cubicle. “Marco,” he asked when he spotted me, “are you recovered?”

“So they tell me, but I’m more interested in knowing about the other members of my party, starting with Dr. Rosati.”

“Dr. Rosati is in surgery at the moment,” he said. “He sustained some injuries to his lower back and elsewhere, and you can see his chart whenever you like. I can’t tell you a lot more, other than to say they weren’t life-threatening. Stefano Argenti suffered much the same injuries as yourself, and he is still in one of the cubicles. Salvatore Alberti suffered at least two gunshot wounds, and last I heard he was in recovery.”

“So, Dani bore the brunt of it,” I said.

“Yes, Conte Marco,” Modesto said. “One of the villains opened fire on the driver and another one tossed a bomb under the van—fortunately a very small bomb. It exploded under and just to the rear of Dr. Rosati’s seat.”

“And the gun battle?” I said.

“Everyone in the lead car and the following car attacked the villains, and I’m sorry to say that two of them got away.”

“Did any of them survive?” I said.

“Sadly, no, except for the ones who fled.”

“Sadly?” Dr. Zaccaro parroted.

“Signor Doctor,” Modesto said, “dead men cannot be questioned.”

“Ah.”

“Thank you, Dr. Zaccaro,” I said. “Let’s go to that lounge, Modesto. I want to hear everything—in detail.”

Stefano caught up with us in the lounge. He, too, was wearing scrubs, and he was anything but a happy camper. “Are you all right?” he said.

“I’m about as all right as you look,” I said. “Have you seen yourself in a mirror?”

“Not yet,” he said.

“Modesto was about to tell me what happened. The last thing I remember clearly was hearing you yell ‘ambush’. Modesto, you have our undivided attention.”

He proceeded to give us a blow-by-blow account of what had happened at the entrance to the tunnel. “Damn,” I said when he had finished, “we’re lucky to be alive.”

“For sure,” Stefano said. “I’m glad your father insisted on calling for more cars after he learned of the threat.”

“Indeed.”

*I’m gonna have to be damn careful when I discuss this. Because Modesto is family. Stefano could easily have slipped and said “our” father, which would have been awkward had someone been listening—on the other hand, Stefano has been dealing with secrecy for hundreds of years, so it’s probably automatic for him. I hate all this secrecy, even though I understand the reason for it.*

“Unless you guys have something else,” I said, “I’m going to go up to the surgery waiting area.”

“I’ll go with you,” Modesto said.

“So will I,” Stefano said.

They followed me down the hall to the elevators and up to the waiting

area. “Stefano,” I said when I had settled in a comfortable chair, “you might as well go on about your business. There’s nothing to do now but wait.”

“Is there someone I can call for you?” he said.

“Not really... wait a minute, yes, there is. You know Andreas, don’t you?”

“Our Andreas, the masseur?”

“The same,” I said. “He and his partner Nick are probably the closest friends Dani and I have in the Duchy.”

“I’ll give him a call.”

“Modesto,” I said, “did the police find anything at the scene?”

“Just the barricades, but no sign of any survivors.”

“How many roads lead all the way down off that mountain?” I said.

“Three, and blockades were set up on all of them within minutes of my call. If there were more than two of them, they’ve either vanished into thin air or....”

“Or?”

“They’re hiding somewhere on the mountain,” he said.

“Geez, that must cover a lot of territory.”

“Indeed.”

“I hope you sent some additional people to our house on the mountain,” I said.

“Yes, I have. The Duke’s honeymoon is over now that there are half a dozen guards around the place.”

“Thank you, Modesto.”

I was so lost in the situation that it barely registered when both of them left. I don’t know how much time went by before it dawned on me that there was a presence in front of me, but when it finally sank in, I looked up and saw Gert standing there, so I stood up. “Gert,” I said, “what are you doing here on a Sunday?”

“Where else would I be when one of my floor supervisors calls me to let me know for whom they’re preparing a bed in the ICU? How is he?”

“In surgery is all I know at this point.”

Seeing the genuine concern on her familiar face somehow allowed my

self-control to break, and before I knew it, I was in her arms, sobbing. She stood quietly until my outburst had run its course, then disengaged herself from my grasp and stepped back a pace. "Okay, Squirt," she said, "now that you've got that out of your system, it's time to get your stiff upper lip back in place before anyone else shows up. In fact, why don't you slip into that restroom across the hall and make yourself presentable?"

"Yeah, you're right. Thanks, Gert."

I went into the restroom, which was thankfully empty, and washed my face as best I could; then I took advantage of the facilities, washed my hands, and went back to the waiting area.

"That's better," she said. "I don't think I've ever seen you lose control of yourself like that—you're usually extremely stoic."

Before I could reply, I spotted a nurse approaching us. "Dr. d'Argenzio," she said, "we have a Signor Alberti in ICU Ward 2, and he insists on speaking to you before we do anything else for him."

"Go ahead," Gert said, "I'll wait here and keep you posted if I learn anything."

"Thanks."

I followed the nurse down the hall and into the ICU area, which consisted of a pair of two-bed wards. In the nearest ward, Sal was in the bed nearest the window, one shoulder swathed in bandages. "Hey, Sal," I said, "how are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

"They said you wanted to see me."

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry, Marco."

"Sorry!" I said. "For what? You saved our lives."

"Maybe, but I should have seen it coming... I should have had more men with us... I should have..."

I silenced him with a finger to his lips. "Sal, you've got to stop beating up on yourself. Nobody, least of all you, could have expected the bad guys to set up something like that so quickly."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. Sal, is there anybody you want us to call?"

"Thanks, but someone in the emergency room called my girlfriend.

She's down in Milan visiting her family right now."

"Is that the good-looking redhead you introduced us to last month?" I said.

"Yeah. Oh, shit. I forgot to ask. How are Stefano and Dani?"

"Stefano escaped with bruises and scrapes, but Dani is still in surgery."

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"Sal, we just took that little side trip, so there's no need to do it again."

"Yeah."

"I think they're waiting to give you something for the pain, so I'll get out of here for now."

I went back to the waiting area, settled down in the same chair, and looked a question at Gert. "Sorry, Squirt, I haven't heard a thing."

"God, this waiting is maddening, isn't it?" I said.

"Now you know how the families of your patients feel."

"Gert, I'm an internist—I don't do surgery."

"Perhaps not, but you do order tests and surgical procedures, all of which require various degrees of waiting."

"Yeah."

The sound of footsteps told us that more than one person was approaching from the direction of the operating rooms, so we were standing in anticipation when a surgeon clad in scrubs appeared. Malcolm was with him.

*Oh, shit! If they've summoned Malcolm to break the news, it must really be bad.*

"Malcolm," I said, "what brings you here? Did they call you in to give me some bad news?"

"I'm sorry, Marco," he said, "but that's pretty much the case." He turned to the surgeon and said, "Doctor, I believe that's your cue."

"It is definitely serious, Dr. d'Argenzio," the surgeon said. "Both of Dr. Rosati's kidneys were damaged, one of them so severely that it isn't likely to ever function again."

"And the other one?" I said.

"The other kidney sustained some damage, but it will be a while before we know how well it's functioning."

“The bottom line, Marco,” Malcolm said, “is that with one non-functioning kidney and the other not performing adequately, if Danilo is to have anything resembling a normal life he will need a kidney transplant.”

I sat down in the chair to take that bit of information in.

“Dr. Rosati is young and in extremely good physical condition,” the surgeon said, “but we won’t know for certain for a few weeks if the one kidney will start to function adequately.”

“Meanwhile,” Malcolm said, “I’m going to start the necessary paperwork to get him on the transplant waiting list.”

“And,” I said, “if a transplant is to happen, we fly in a surgeon from Geneva, correct?”

“Just so,” Malcolm said. “I’ve been trying for years to convince the powers-that-be to start a medical school at the university and make this a teaching hospital, but nobody pays attention.”

“I can see where being a teaching hospital would enable us to attract any number of top specialists,” I said.

“True,” he said, “but we’re getting off track. Suffice it to say that if a transplant happens, we can make it happen right here.”

“Thank you, gentlemen,” I said. “Is he still in recovery?”

“Yes,” the surgeon said. “They’ll summon you to the ICU the minute he’s transferred there.”

“Thank you.”

The surgeon left, and Malcolm finally registered Gert’s presence. “Hello, Mrs. McClanahan,” he said, “sorry to see you under such sad circumstances.”

They began to carry on a conversation, and I tuned them out—my mind was overwhelmed with visions of multiple futures, depending upon the outcome of Dani’s medical problems. *Stop it*, I finally admonished myself. *He will come through this—eventually—so hang onto that thought for dear life.*

“Hey, Marco.” Someone’s voice broke into my reverie, so I looked in the direction of the sounds.

“Hello, Andreas,” I said. “Thanks for coming. Where’s Nick?”

“He’s at home, preparing a Greek meal to take your mind off of things. I’m supposed to bring you home with me later.”

“Tell him I appreciate the thought, but I can’t leave the hospital right now, and given the current situation, the security people won’t like it if I start running around the Duchy.”

“Who said anything about right now, Squirt?” Gert said. “Sooner or later you’ve got to eat, and I know how much you like Greek food.”

“Not to worry, Marco,” Andreas said, “we’ll bring Nick’s creations here or to il Castello if needed.”

“I’m sorry, Andreas,” I said, “do you know Mrs. McClanahan? Dani and I knew her in Boston, and she’s been the supervisor of nursing here at the hospital for several years now. Gert, this is Andreas. He’s a distant cousin of mine.”

“I think we met once when she was with you at Papa’s,” Andreas said.

“Good afternoon, Andreas,” Malcolm said after Andreas and Gert had exchanged greetings. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“That’s not my fault, Dr. Sanderson. You know where to find me.”

“That I do, and I’m long overdue for a session under your talented hands.”

We chatted for a minute or two, and Malcolm said, “If you folks will excuse me, I’ve got some paperwork to take care of.”

“How’s the patient?” Andreas asked when Malcolm had disappeared down the hallway.

“He’s in recovery, and I’m waiting for him to be transferred to the ICU so I can see him.”

I filled him in on the details of Dani’s injuries. “Oh, Marco,” he said, suddenly very serious, “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

I had gotten uncomfortable in the chair I was using and was now sitting with my back to the elevators. I heard the warning ding of an elevator door opening and saw a change in Andreas’s body language a few moments later. This caused me to look around just in time to see Father and Trevor walking in our direction. I stood facing them, and when Father opened his arms, I willingly embraced him.

“Marco, my boy,” he said. “I cannot tell you how distressed I was to hear about the attack.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Trevor extended his hand and made an appropriate remark. “Thanks,



Trevor,” I said. “I don’t believe you know our nursing supervisor, Mrs. McClanahan.”

“No, I don’t, but I’ve heard good things about her.”

“Gert,” I said, “this is Trevor Price, one of my many cousins.”

“Sit back down, Marco,” Father said, “before you fall down—you look worn out.”

I sat, as did Father and Trevor after they shook hands with Andreas.

“How is he?” Father said.

I told them what I knew.

“Damn,” Trevor said, “that’s terrible.”

“Father,” I said, “is everything all right at the house?”

“Absolutely. Angelina is still beside herself with joy over the finding of her relatives. She sends you her love and says she will pray for Dani.”

“What’s the status of the investigation, if you know?”

“The police have determined that there was another vehicle at the site in which at least two men escaped.”

“That’s not good.”

“Not to worry—we will catch them,” he said. “Strangers stand out in a small country such as ours.”

“Yeah, but we don’t know what they look like.”

“Do not be too sure about that,” he said. “One of them is almost certainly the man who escaped from prison. He strikes me as just the sort of man who would want to witness his revenge being carried out.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but one thing bothers me about this whole incident.”

“What would that be?”

“An attack such as the one today would surely have involved planning that must have taken many days. If our villain only escaped two or three days ago, the people involved must have been planning this for a long time, so we aren’t necessarily talking about men who have only arrived in-country in the last two or three days.”

“That is an interesting observation,” Father said, “and I will pass it along to the relevant authority.”

“Oh, shit,” I said, “I need to call Lucia and tell her not to expect us.”

“It has been taken care of,” Father said.

“Thank you.”

“How do you feel?” he said.

“Numb.”

“That is understandable under the circumstances.”

Gert touched me on the shoulder, and when I looked in her direction I saw that she was pointing toward the hallway. “I think someone wants your attention,” she said, “but is reluctant to intrude on your conversation with the Duke.”

I stood and walked over to where the nurse was standing. “Have you news?” I said.

“Yes, Doctor,” she said. “He’s in ICU Ward 2.”

“Is he awake?”

“Not yet, but it won’t be long.”

I followed her down the hallway and into the same ward I had just left, where a quick glance told me that Sal was out cold. Dani was in the bed next to him, and I walked over to it and looked at the man I loved; the man with whom I had spent every night of my life for nearly fifteen years. It was not a pretty sight, what with tubes and wires running in all directions from his body. I sat in the chair beside the bed, took hold of the hand that didn’t have tubes attached, and kissed it. Then, still holding Dani’s hand against my mouth, I leaned forward, pressed my forehead against the mattress, and prayed harder than I had ever in my life prayed.

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CHAPTER 11

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*Dani*

AS I began to regain some semblance of consciousness, my mind was awash with images—images of people bending over me; people asking me stupid questions; images of.... *Oh, my God. Where the fuck am I?* I opened an exploratory eye and saw a ceiling painted a neutral color; then I opened the other eye and rolled both eyes experimentally.

*Shit! I'm in a hospital bed. Are all of those tubes and wires coming out of me? I hurt all over. My left hand has things taped to it, but why can't I move my right hand? There's something wet touching it, and I hear mumbling. I wiggled my fingers to see if they worked, and the wetness went away. Then I saw Marco sitting beside the bed.*

"You're awake!" he said.

"More or less, I think."

*Was that my voice? It sounded more like a croak, and why does my throat hurt?*

"You sound hoarse," he said. "Want some water?"

"Please."

A straw was inserted between my lips, and I sucked greedily on it for a minute. "Enough," I said.

"Okay."

"My throat hurts," I said.

"That's because you've had surgery, and you were intubated."

"Surgery?"

"They had to dig a bunch of stuff out of your lower back and repair

some damage.”

“What happened? I remember somebody yelling ‘ambush’, and after that, nothing.”

“They were waiting for us at the end of the tunnel. Sal took a couple of bullets, then they threw a bomb under the van. Apparently it landed under the rear compartment just behind your seat and ahead of the wheels, so you bore the brunt of the damage. Stefano and I mostly got cuts and bruises and mild concussions out of it.”

“Where’s Sal?” I said.

“You’re in the ICU, and he’s in the bed next to you—out cold at the moment.”

“Surgery for what?” I said.

“I just told you—they had to dig a bunch of stuff out of your lower back and repair some damage.”

“Damage to what?” I said.

“Your kidneys.”

“Shit. How bad is it?”

“One of them isn’t functioning, but the other one is limping along.”

“Limping along?” I parroted.

“Babe, there’s no easy way to say this.”

“Just open your mouth and say it, then,” I said.

“If the one kidney doesn’t get up to speed, you’ll certainly need dialysis and eventually a transplant.”

“Shit.”

“You asked for the truth.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Babe, people can live for years with dialysis.”

“Sure, they can,” I said.

“Enough of that. You need to look on the bright side.”

“Is there one?”

“You’re alive, the rest of your body is okay except for a few cuts and bruises here and there, and there are a lot of people who love you and are

pulling for you. Some of us even need you—desperately.”

“I see we’re awake,” a nurse said from behind Marco.

“More or less,” I said.

“And how are we feeling?”

“I don’t know about you, but I feel like shit.”

“As soon as I check your vital signs, I’ll show you how to self-administer your pain medication,” she said.

“Sounds good to me.”

She busied herself doing what nurses do, and I focused on Marco. “You don’t look so hot yourself, Marco,” I said.

“No kidding? You should see the other guy.”

“Yeah, what about the other guy or guys?” I said.

“There was a gun battle, and they’re all tango uniform.”

“Tango uniform?” he parroted.

“It’s a military term and means that they’re tits up.”

“Tits up.... Oh, I get it. All of them?” I said.

“Well, two of them are. We believe that an additional two men escaped in a vehicle, but Father’s people are scouring the country looking for them.”

The nurse’s voice interrupted us. “You can’t come in here. Only one visitor at a time— Oh, Mrs. McClanahan... I didn’t recognize you in casual clothes.”

“Yeah,” Marco quipped, “she cleans up real good, doesn’t she?”

“Watch it, Squirt,” Gert said. “You’re not too big to spank.”

The nurse’s face registered the fact that she wasn’t accustomed to good-natured repartee between doctors and nursing supervisors, so I said, “Don’t mind them, Signora, they’ve known each other for years.”

“That we have,” Gert said. “How are you, Dani?”

“I’ve been better. Can’t remember ever having been worse.”

“I should think. Well, you’ve been around hospitals long enough to know the drill—just lie back, follow orders, and everything will be all right.”

“Oh, sure it will,” I said.

“Maintain that attitude and it might not,” she said. “Attitude is a critical

component in healing.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

I heard footsteps, and the nurse opened her mouth again to admonish someone; then her eyes grew wide and her posture straightened. The Duke walked up to the bedside. “Hello, Dani,” he said. “Are they taking good care of you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I am very glad to hear it, and I want you to know that my people have been instructed to keep at it until they find the people who did this.”

“That’s good to know,” I said.

“Marco,” the Duke said, “you need to go home and get some rest.”

“I will, Father,” he said, “as soon as I’m satisfied that Dani has everything he needs.”

“For your information,” the Duke said, “I have authorized the purchase of a number of automobiles with light armor. Better late than never, as they say.”

“Really?” Marco said.

“Yes. We have been toying with the notion for years, and I think the time has come to act. How is Salvatore?”

“I haven’t seen his chart, Father, but based on what I was told, he will recover fully—his main problem will involve getting rid of the guilt he feels. He somehow has the idea that he failed in his job.”

“Time will take care of that,” the Duke said.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Regrettably, I must go now—as you know, we have guests. Mrs. McClanahan, can I rely upon you to make this stubborn young man go home after a while?”

“Yes, Sir,” Gert said, “you certainly can.”

The Duke turned and left the room as quickly as he’d arrived.

“He doesn’t waste words, does he?” Gert said.

“No, Ma’am,” Marco said.

The nurse showed me how to use the device that controlled the morphine (or whatever it was) drip, gave me a pill to take, and left the room.

“What was that pill?” I said.

“Most likely a sedative,” Gert said.

“Good. I think I’d like to sleep now.”

“That’s our cue, Squirt,” Gert said, and she pulled Marco to his feet.

He leaned over the bed and kissed me thoroughly. “See you in the morning,” he said.

“Love you,” I said.

“Me too, you.”

They left, and I pushed the button and surrendered to sleep.

## CHAPTER 12

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### *Marco*

I ALLOWED Gert to lead me from the room. “Marco,” she said, using a tone I recognized all too well, “there isn’t a damn thing you can do here. He’ll probably sleep through the night, and you owe it to yourself and to him to go home and do the same.”

Andreas and Modesto stood as Gert and I walked into the waiting area. “How is he?” Andreas said.

“In the process of being sedated for the evening,” I said.

“Good. Are you ready to go home with me and have some Greek food? You’re invited as well, Mrs. McClanahan.”

“That’s up to you, Modesto,” I said. “Do you think it’s safe to go back up the mountain right now?”

“It’s probably a good deal safer now than it was a few hours ago,” he said. “I’ll have someone drive you to Signor Loukades’s home, and after dinner he’ll bring Mrs. McClanahan back here, then take you to the castle.”

“I don’t have a problem with that. Gert?”

“That’ll work,” she said.

Modesto made a quick call on his cell phone, and by the time we were at the entrance to the emergency room, a car and driver were waiting for us. He gave the driver some instructions, and Gert and I got into the car.

“Can we drop you off at your car, Andreas?” I asked through the open window.

“No need, Marco. It’s right over there, three cars down.”

When we arrived at Andreas’s house, he invited the driver to come



inside and eat with us. Nick served us out on the terrace in front of their great room, and we sat, eating wonderful Greek food and enjoying the view, interspersed with some conversation. The somewhat mixed company didn't allow for intimate conversation, but that was fine with me, and I made conversation with the driver both as a diversion for myself and to make him feel less like an outsider.

Eventually, I said, "This has been great, Andreas, and your food, Nick, was beyond good. That being said, I've had a very long day, and I think it's time to go home and crawl into my bed."

"Yeah," Gert said. "I'm older than the rest of you, and I need my beauty sleep. Are you going to work in the morning, Marco?"

"Why not? There's nothing to be gained—or accomplished—by sitting around fretting and worrying."

"That's the attitude," she said.

Everyone thanked Andreas and Nick for the food, and we got in the car and headed back to the hospital. In the parking lot, the driver waited until Gert was safely in her car before heading to the castle. When we got to the parking garage, he drove up to the elevator, got out, and opened the door. "Shall I ride up with you?" he said.

"I don't think so. I ought to be safe here in il Castello."

I had hoped to get to the master bedroom without being drawn into a long conversation with Lucia, but it was not to be, for she appeared two minutes after I unlocked the door. So I poured a glass of wine, sat down in a comfortable chair, and answered her questions as fully and completely as I could. Then I pleaded exhaustion and said that I had a couple of e-mails to send before I retired. In the den, I sat down at my laptop and sent an e-mail to Luciano, bringing him up to date. Then I sent him a second e-mail, with a copy to my father, telling him that Maria Jammalo from Calabria would love to talk to him if he could get to Aragoni in the next couple of days. Finally, I refilled my wineglass and went to the master bedroom. Before I undressed for bed, I called Grandmother to bring her up to date. The last call I made was to Gert.

"Hey, Gert," I said.

"You should be in bed, Squirt."

"Working on it. Listen, I have a question that you are uniquely qualified to answer."

“Me?”

“You’re an Italian from the North End of Boston, right?”

“You know I am,” she said.

“You know that Dani’s family pretty much disowned him years ago, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, in light of that, and considering the seriousness of his injuries, should I give them a telephone call as a courtesy?”

“It’s certainly more than they deserve,” she said.

“No argument there, but I sense hesitation.”

“On the other hand,” she said, “they are his parents.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Maybe I’ll call Father first and find out if the Gulfstream that’s based in the States is going to be available in the next few days—an offer of a free trip might be an inducement to them.”

“That’s a good idea, Marco. A nice little bribe might induce them to do the right thing. Refresh my memory—have you met them?”

“Oh, yeah. He introduced me as his boyfriend a couple of years after we met—I had just graduated from college at the time and he was halfway through.”

“And?”

“There was a lot of yelling, screaming, and crying, and things got said that are better left unsaid—not by us, but by them. These people are traditional Roman Catholics to the core.”

“Why don’t you give it a shot anyway?” she said.

“Yeah, nothing ventured.... Thanks, Gert. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Squirt.”

I composed a long e-mail to Father, sent it to him, and waited fifteen minutes. Then I called to see if he had received it, which he had.

“I will have the schedule back to you in a few minutes,” he said, “and for what it is worth, you are doing the right thing.”

“Yes, Sir. That’s what I try to do. My best to your bride and her new family.”

“Marco, you have no idea how much this has meant to her.”

“Father, I have an inkling. Remember, before I met la Contessa—my grandmother—you and Mama were all I had.”

“True enough. Good night, Marco.”

“Good night, Father.”

While I was waiting for Father’s e-mail and before I undressed for bed, I had a sudden urge to look in on the boys. So I walked barefoot into their room and stood looking at them for a few moments. I had never planned on having children and had in fact been somewhat ambivalent about the idea. In the end, I had been persuaded that Conti needed an heir, so I did what was expected of me under the circumstances. Now, three years later, I was beginning to realize how much it really meant to me. From the boys’ room I went back to the master bedroom, stripped for bed, and pulled on a robe. I carried my glass into the den, sat down at my laptop, and opened the e-mail program. Father was as good as his word—the schedule was waiting for me, and I sent it to the printer. I looked up the telephone number in Boston and was seconds from dialing it when I had what I thought was a splendid idea: *Let’s keep this contact at one degree of removal from myself and Dani*. With that in mind, I composed an e-mail and sent it. Then I looked up a different number in Boston and called William and Henry Lane, who were not only first cousins and partners in life but were also partners in their own law firm. They had been classmates of mine during my years at Groton. The telephone on the other end of the call was answered almost on the first ring.

“Hello.”

“Hello, William,” I said, “Marco d’Argenzio here.”

“Marco. Fancy hearing from you.”

“Did you get the e-mail I just sent you?” I said.

“Sorry, we just walked in the door, and I haven’t been on the computer—give me a minute.”

“When you have it, put Henry on the phone with you.”

“Sure,” he said.

A minute or two later, Henry came on the line. “Hey, Marco. That’s terrible news.”

“Yes, it is. I’m still having a hard time getting my mind wrapped around the whole thing.”

“To answer the question in your e-mail,” William said, “we’ll be more than happy to make contact for you. In fact, it’s early enough here that we can

make the call after dinner.”

“Fine. The offer stands as written, but their acceptance absolutely must be conditioned on an understanding that they will be here on sufferance.”

“We understand perfectly,” Henry said.

“I don’t even know if Dani’s parents have valid passports.”

“I think there are procedures in place for compassionate trips, or words to that effect,” William said. “Don’t worry about it, we’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, guys, and thanks. Be sure to send me a bill.”

“Damn, Marco,” William said, “just when you had us thinking we were doing a good deed, you have to go and spoil it.”

“All right, don’t send me a bill, okay?”

“That’s better. We’ll let you know—probably by this time tomorrow.”

“Thanks, guys.”

“Give our best to Dani.”

“Will do,” I said.

After the call ended, I looked at the clock and decided that it wasn’t too late to call Grandmother again. She was surprised to hear from me a second time, but when I told her what I wanted to do, she didn’t hesitate for one moment.

“Of course I will, Marco,” she said. “Just let me know when.”

“You’ll know as soon as I do, and thank you, Grandmother. Thank you very much.”

I went to bed, knowing that I had set the wheels in motion for what might well turn out to be a very good thing indeed—if it didn’t blow up in my face.

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CHAPTER 13

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*Dani*

*How does anyone manage to sleep in a hospital unless they're drugged out of their mind?* I drifted in and out of sleep all night long, but it seemed that every time I finally went to sleep someone found an urgent reason to, if not deliberately wake me, at least do something to me, for me, or nearby me that had the same effect. When I finally came to, around six, I think it must have been, the first thing I saw was Sal sitting on the edge of the adjacent bed—looking straight at me.

“Good morning, Sal,” I said.

“Good morning. How are you?”

“I’ve been better. Yourself?”

“Getting there,” he said. “Dani, I’m so sorry about what happened.”

“Whoa!” I said. “Stop right there with that nonsense. By all accounts you saved our lives.”

“I can’t imagine how.”

“Because when Stefano yelled, ‘Step on it’, or whatever it was he said—I’m a little fuzzy about that at the moment—you stepped on it.”

“I should have done more,” he said.

“Listen to me, Sal. You did more than anyone could have reasonably been expected to do, okay?”

“Well....”

“Well, nothing.”

A doctor came into the ward, followed by a nurse, and our conversation ceased. I eyed the doctor hopefully, but his interest was focused on Sal, and I

heard him tell Sal that he would be moved to a regular room later today and probably sent home in a couple of days.

“That was good news, wasn’t it?” I said after the doctor left.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You guess. Does that mean you like it here?”

“Not hardly,” he said.

“Count your blessings, then. I was a little out of it last night, but don’t you have a really beautiful girlfriend who rushed back from Milan or someplace because she’s eager to take care of you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I wouldn’t let her hear that lack of enthusiasm. What’s the problem?”

“She wants to move in with me and ultimately get married, and she will definitely use the care-giving as leverage,” he said.

“Ah, I see. She hears wedding bells, and you still want to sort of play the field, as they say in America.”

“Something like that.”

“Well then, Sal, old buddy, you’re on your own with that little problem. I don’t give advice to the lovelorn.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Good morning, glory,” Marco said from the doorway. “You’re looking a tad better today. Hello, Sal.”

He walked over and stood between the beds for a moment, talking to both of us; then he went around to the other side of my bed, took my hand, and sat down.

“You’re early aren’t you?” I said.

“I wanted to be here when your surgeon made his rounds.”

“Everything all right at home?” I said.

“Yeah, but we have three little boys who don’t understand why Papa Dani wasn’t at the breakfast table this morning, not to mention that our bed seemed awfully empty last night. I was trying to remember the last time we were apart for a night, but I don’t think we ever have been, have we?”

“Not that I can recall,” I said.

“Good morning, Dr. d’Argenzio,” a voice said from the doorway, “and

how is the patient today?”

“I thought it was your job to tell me how I am,” I said.

“Testy,” the surgeon said, “that’s a good sign.”

He checked my vitals and asked Marco to prop up first one side of me and then the other so he could check my incisions. “Looking good,” he said, “if I do say so myself. I think we can probably move you to a private room tomorrow.”

“What about going home?” I said.

“Ask me that question in a couple of days, and I’ll have an answer for you.”

“If that’s as good as it gets...,” I said.

“It is. Just keep on following orders and you’ll get through this with flying colors.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Is he always this surly, Marco?” the surgeon said.

“Truthfully, no.”

The surgeon smiled at that and left the room. Marco stood in preparation for doing the same thing. “Gotta make my own rounds, babe,” he said. He gave me a quick kiss, said, “See you later,” and left.

Sal, who had been lying quietly in his bed through all this, said, “How long have you and Marco been together?”

“Not quite fifteen years.”

“And in all that time, you’ve never been apart overnight?”

“If we have, I don’t remember it; evidently Marco’s memory is the same.”

“I can’t imagine sleeping with the same person for fifteen months, let alone fifteen years,” he said.

“Sal, when you meet the right person, trust me, you’ll feel differently.”

Gert marched into the room, all official-looking in her tailored suit. “Good morning, Dani,” she said. “How goes it?”

“It goes,” I said, “except I have a question.”

“Ask.”

“How the hell does any patient manage to sleep in a hospital?” I said.

“That’s what all those wonderful drugs are supposed to ensure. Did you have a bad night?”

“Gert, every time I drifted off to sleep, someone found an urgent need to come in here and do something that woke me up.”

“Did you ask for a pill around eleven?” she said.

“No. Should I have?”

“Absolutely. I’ll make a note on your chart telling somebody to remind you that you have that option.”

“Bless you, Gert.”

“What did your doctor say?” she said.

I told her.

“That sounds encouraging.”

“It sort of confused me at the time,” I said, “but I’ll accept your professional opinion.”

“Damn straight.”

She looked at Sal and said, “Don’t I know you?”

“You should, Gert,” I said. “You’ve met Sal. He was Marco’s bodyguard in Siena before he moved to Aragoni to do the same thing.”

“Sorry, Sal,” she said. “I didn’t recognize you without your clothes.”

Sal, who had tossed his sheets to one side and whose hospital gown had ridden halfway up his torso, hastily pulled the sheet back over his body.

“Sorry,” she said, “did I embarrass you? In any case, whatever you’re hiding under there, I assure you I’ve seen more than one like it—seen one, seen them all. Do you need anything?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Then I’ll see you guys later. I need to get busy.”

“Bye, Gert,” I said.

“I like her,” Sal said when she was out the door and out of earshot.

“Yeah, so do we. She’s a character and has become a really good friend. Marco knew her when she was a floor supervisor at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. I worked there, too, and had seen her around but didn’t



really know her at that time.”

A nurse came to gave me some more pills, and I sort of lost track of time until an orderly and an aide came to move Sal to a regular room. “Bye, Sal,” I said as they wheeled him out the door. “I’ll miss you.”

Marco stopped by shortly after that. “I thought you’d be here at lunchtime,” I said.

“Sorry, but I worked through lunch because I’ve got to go to the airport.”

“Why?”

“To meet Luciano and escort him up to the house—he’s meeting with Maria Jammalo from Calabria this evening.”

“Is he gonna stay there or in our apartment?”

“He’ll stay in the apartment overnight—I think he wants to use the baths. I’ll bring him by to say hello on the way to the airport in the morning.”

“Busy, busy, busy,” I said.

“Yeah.”

## CHAPTER 14

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### *Marco*

MODESTO and I were waiting in the hangar when the Gulfstream was wheeled in. "Hi, Luciano," I said the minute his feet touched the hangar floor. "Ready to go?"

"You bet, Marco."

"Do you have luggage?"

"Just this overnight bag," he said.

When we got to the house, I introduced Luciano to Maria Jammalo and started to excuse myself.

"Marco," Luciano said, "why don't you sit in on our conversation?"

"Thanks, Luciano, but when you speak for the Conti Group, you speak for me. However, I'll sit in on part of your meeting if you like; then I have a few urgent matters to discuss with my father."

"Okay," he said. "Where shall we go to talk?"

"The den is comfortable. Follow me."

I led them into the den and listened to their conversation, adding only an occasional item here and there. Finally, I excused myself to go consult Father and left the den. I found him on the terrace talking to Modesto; Angelina and her grandmother were at the other end of the terrace, apparently deep in conversation.

"Have you heard from your friends in Boston?" Father said.

"Not yet. I don't really expect to hear from them until later this evening."

"If your plan works, you will have done a very good thing."

"The operative word, Father, is 'if'."

“Just so,” he said.

Modesto had a quizzical look on his face, so I explained what we were talking about.

“And his parents haven’t spoken to him in all these years?” Modesto said.

“Not a single word. He used to contrive to ‘accidentally’ run into his grandmother when she was out and about on Saturday afternoons, and she would allow him to buy her lunch when he did. On the other hand, she would never make an actual appointment to meet him.”

“Holy Mother Church has much to answer for,” Father said.

“Amen to that,” I said.

“How is Dani?” Father said.

“Getting better. Tired of the hospital.”

“I suppose that is a good sign. What about his kidney function?”

“It’s much too early to tell. All we can do at this point is hope, but I’m very much afraid that he will ultimately be faced with long-term dialysis, or the need for a transplant. Malcolm has already started the paperwork for the latter.”

“How is the meeting going?” Father said, nodding in the direction from which I had just come.

“Well, I think. Luciano and Maria seem to have hit it off.”

“I am glad to hear that. I have certainly enjoyed talking to someone who remembers Rome as she was.”

“You should write about your experiences of Rome and other things,” I said. “Perhaps even publish some anonymous memoirs or something like that.”

“Actually, in a way, I have done just that over the years.”

“Really?” I said.

“Absolutely. As soon as we were established here, I began to dictate both my impressions of things that were happening and my recollections of things that had happened.”

“Dictate? To whom?”

“To whoever was available that could write both legibly and quickly. I still do it, only these days I do my own writing, using a computer. All of those writings are safely secured in the archives.”

"I'd love to read them someday," I said.

"And you may, just as soon as you master Etruscan—that is the language in which they are written. When computers became widely available, one of our people created a set of symbols and a keyboard overlay for those of us who use and/or teach Etruscan to others."

"I'll take you up on that one of these days."

Eventually, Luciano and Maria emerged from the house onto the terrace. "Judging by the smiles on both of your faces," I said, "it must have been a fruitful meeting."

"You could say that," Luciano said.

"Yes, you could," Maria said.

"I've got to get busy and find someone to run the new business," he said.

"That's right," I said, "the former owner was also the manager."

"True, and his children want no part of it—they just want the cash."

"Handle it, Luciano, handle it."

"I've already got feelers out. Perhaps by the time I get back to Conti I'll have a few nibbles."

"I guess you're ready to go to the castle," I said.

"That I am. I can hear the baths calling."

"Baths?" Maria parroted. "Oh, yes, you actually have Roman-style baths here, do you not?"

"That we do," I said, "with one major difference."

"What is that?" she said.

"In Rome, men and women didn't use the baths at the same time—here, they do. And they're a huge tourist attraction."

"You should try them," Father said.

"Could I?" she said.

"By all means," I said.

"When?"

"Right now, if you like. Come with us. From the look of things, the other ladies won't even know you've gone."

"Go ahead," Father said. "Modesto will have one of his people take you there and bring you back when you're through."

“What do I need to take with me?” she said.

“Nothing at all—everything you need is already there.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” she said.

So we went back down the mountain and to the castle complex. When we stepped through the door, Maria was overwhelmed. “It really is like the paintings I have seen of the baths in Rome,” she said, “but on a smaller scale.”

*Good thinking, Maria. I suppose when you’ve lived that long you reach a point at which you automatically tailor what you say to fit the audience.*

“Absolutely,” I said, and I pointed, “the dressing rooms are over there.”

From our respective dressing rooms, we went to the *calidarium* and soaked in the hot water for a while. Eventually, Luciano excused himself to go have a massage, leaving Maria and me alone.

“It is difficult to remember when it is safe to talk and when it is not safe,” she said.

“This is true. I find it easier to simply avoid certain subjects unless there are only family members present.”

“And Luciano is not family, yes?”

“Actually, he is family... but on my mother’s side. He’s the grandson of my maternal grandmother’s brother and, therefore, my cousin.”

“And you trust him completely?” she said.

“With everything concerning the business, yes—but not with this. We never talk about certain subjects to outsiders, unless they are spouses or significant others.”

“And the spouses and significant others are never indiscreet?”

“No, they are not—probably because we are extremely careful in our choice of mates.” *And with a little help from a friendly hypnotist, but I don’t think she needs to know that right now.* “Actually, now that I think of it, Father told me that some of the spouses of family members don’t know the truth.”

“That sounds complicated.”

“Yes, it is,” I said, “but it’s a small price to pay for being able to live in the real world.”

“As opposed to living in a remote and isolated area such as ours?”

“No offense, but yes.”

“None taken. We have done what was necessary to survive,” she said.

“Have you ever told a husband or a son the truth about you?”

“Only once. My mother and grandmother advised against it, but when I was young and foolish, I once tried to tell a husband about me, and things got very bad. Ultimately, I had to flee to another part of what is now Italy.”

“That’s very sad.”

“Yes it is, but as I said, we do what we must to survive.”

“I understand,” I said.

“Tell me about your mother, I understand she yet lives.”

“I’m sorry that I had to dodge that little fact in Calabria when someone asked if my father was a widower.”

“You told the truth—that he had outlived many wives—you just left out a tiny portion of it.”

“Yeah,” I said. I gave her the short version of that sad story, and she responded appropriately.

“Oh, that is so sad.”

“Yes, it is. She spoke in haste to her father, without having told my father what she planned to do, and has paid a price for it ever since.”

“And the doctors can do nothing?” she said.

“Father has spent a fortune on doctors over the years, and the answer is always the same—she is hopelessly mad.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too, but I’ve had thirty-odd years to deal with it. If you will excuse me, I see a masseur is available. I’ve had an extremely tense couple of days.”

“By all means, go ahead,” she said. “I will probably move to the *tepidarium* after a bit.”

I left the pool, retrieved my robe, and headed for the appropriate door. As I’d suspected, it was Andreas who had become available, which was fine with me.

“Hey, Marco,” he said when I entered the room. “I expect you have need of my services after all that’s happened.”

“You’ve got that right,” I said. “Just be careful around those cuts and bruises.”

I hadn't realized just how tense I was until Andreas's magic hands began to work on my shoulders and lower back. Of course, being a professional, he sensed it immediately.

"Marco, your poor back is tied up in knots inside."

"Yeah, but you're gonna take care of that."

"Absolutely," he said.

An hour later, all of the tension in my body was gone, so I went to the showers and soaped all of the massage oils from my body. Then I went back to the *calidarium* for a while before joining Luciano and Maria in the *tepidarium*.

As we left the baths, I said, "Luciano, let me give you a key to the apartment—Lucia is expecting you. I'll walk with Maria to the garage and see her safely on her way."

"Thanks, Marco. I really do need to get on the Internet."

Maria said goodbye to Luciano and followed me to the garage. "Thank you for the experience, Conte Marco," she said. "It brought back many pleasant memories from a very long time ago."

"You're very welcome, Maria. If Angelina has her way, I'm certain both you and Concettina will be coming back to Aragoni regularly in the future."

"No doubt."

I had called her driver as we left the baths, and he was waiting with the car as we stepped off the elevator. When I got upstairs, Luciano was in the den using his laptop; I wanted to do the same thing, but the boys were clamoring for my attention, so I sat down on the floor in their room and played with them for a while. Luciano was leaving the den when I finally extricated myself from the boys.

"You look pleased," I said.

"Yeah. There were three e-mails waiting for me—with resumes attached. One of them looks really promising."

"That's good news. I'm going to check my e-mail, then go to the hospital for a short visit."

"May I join you? I'd like to say hello to Dani."

"Absolutely."

## CHAPTER 15

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### *Dani*

WHEN you're confined to a hospital bed, time moves at a speed which can best be described as glacial. My surgeon paid me a quick visit before he left for the day, and without Sal to talk with, I was getting bored. True, the pain which came and went was a distraction, but hardly a welcome one. Which is why I was doubly glad to see Marco walk through the door, followed by Luciano. Marco walked over and kissed me before he said anything. It was a long kiss.

"Guys," Luciano said, "I'd tell you to get a room, but..."

"Hi, Luciano," I said. "That was funny, but it hurts when I laugh."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. Since they rolled my roommate out of here, I've been dying for someone to talk to."

"Your roommate?" he said.

"You've met Sal," Marco said to Luciano. "He's the guy that met us at the train when we arrived from Milan that time."

"Oh, yeah," Luciano said, "and he was shot a couple of times during the attack, wasn't he? Sorry, the name didn't register when you told me the story."

"Has your surgeon been by this afternoon?" Marco said.

"Yeah."

"And?"

"I'm being moved to a private room tomorrow."



“Did he have anything to say about your kidney output?”

“Only that it’s much too early to form an opinion,” I said.

“Damn.”

“Yeah. Luciano, how did your meeting with the lady from Calabria go?”

“Very well, actually. The wine wholesaler that we’re buying is going to have a lock on some of the best wines in that region.”

“Cool.”

“The boys miss you,” Marco said.

“I miss them too.”

“Is there anything I can get you?” he said.

“Out of here, and this fucking catheter out of me—it’s really annoying.”

“Let me rephrase that—is there anything I can get you that you’re allowed to have or do?”

“My laptop would be nice,” I said.

“I’ll bring it to work with me in the morning.”

“How did you get past the nurses with an extra visitor, Marco?”

“Luciano and I marched right past the desk as though we owned the place. The nurse in charge didn’t even look up from her computer screen.”

“So much for security,” I said.

“Babe, as you very well know, getting into the building is somewhat more difficult than a march past a desk.”

“Yeah. You look a little more rested than you did this morning.”

“Luciano and I took Maria to the baths, and I had a session with Andreas. He said my back was really in knots.”

“Tell him hello for me next time you see him,” I said.

“Will do. He and Nick want me to come have dinner with them again soon.”

“If you had a soak and a massage, you’re probably more than ready to call it a night.”

“True, but I had to come see you before I did that.”

“Thanks for that. Actually, I think I’m about ready for that wonderful little pill they allow me to have.”

“Pain getting bad?” he said.

“It comes and goes. Right now, it seems to be coming, and I don’t like having to push that little button any more than necessary.”

“When we pass the desk on the way out, I’ll tell them you’re ready for the pill.”

“Thanks.”

## CHAPTER 16

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### *Marco*

DANI and I said good night, kissed, and Luciano and I left the ICU. I stopped at the desk, got the nurse's attention, and told her Dani was ready for his pill.

"I'll see to it, Doctor," she said. "Did you and your friend have a nice visit?"

"So," I said, "you did see us walk by."

"I have excellent peripheral vision—of course I did," she said.

"I'm very glad to hear that. I wouldn't want just anyone to go barging into the ICU. Next time I talk to your boss, I'll be sure to put in a good word with her."

"Mrs. McClanahan runs a tight ship—she is firm, but fair."

"That she is. Good night."

By the time we got back to the apartment, Luciano and I were both yawning. "I just remembered something," I said.

"What?" he said.

"We forgot to eat. Shall we raid the refrigerator?"

"Yeah, a sandwich would be good."

We sat at the kitchen counter, built sandwiches using the available materials, and sipped glasses of wine for a while. Finally, I said, "I've got to go to the computer and see if Boston has been heard from."

"Boston?"

"I'm attempting to arrange a little surprise for Dani."

"Really?" he said.

“Yeah.” I filled him in on my plans.

“Well,” Luciano said, “good luck with that. I hope it works.”

“We shall see.”

I went into the den, sat down at my desk, and booted the laptop. There were two e-mails from Boston—one stated that Dani’s mother and Grandmother had accepted my offer, and the other was a request from William and Henry that they accompany the women. Neither of the women had valid passports, but in an emergency, passports could be obtained in adequate time. I sent them an e-mail saying great, no problem, and then I arranged for the necessary trips by the two Gulfstreams that would be involved. The US-based Gulfstream would pick my visitors up in Boston and deliver them to Aragoni. The locally based Gulfstream would pick up Grandmother in Siena and Father Rinaldo in Conti; it would arrive the evening before the plane from Boston was due. Making these arrangements involved several e-mails and two telephone calls with Father.

During the last call, he said, “Your apartment is too small for that many guests, so you should bring them up here. Angelina and I will move back to the castle before they arrive.”

“Are you sure?” I said. “I hate for you to cut your honeymoon short just because I have company.”

“Marco,” he said, “this is an extraordinary situation, and we really do not mind. Truth be told, my bride is still floating on such a cloud of happiness at having met her grandmother that she has forgotten we are still technically on our honeymoon. As you know, we have plenty of room in my suite in the castle.”

“All right, then, and thank you, Father.”

“At the risk of repeating something I said yesterday, let me say that you are doing a really good thing,” he said.

“Yeah. I just hope it works.”

“Time will tell. Good night, my boy.”

“Good night, Father.”

When I finally went to sleep, it was with the fingers of both hands mentally crossed.

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CHAPTER 17

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*Dani*

I MANAGED to make it through the night, despite the constant comings and goings in the ICU, most of which must have involved installing a new resident, because when I woke up, the bed next to me was once again occupied. *What does etiquette require in such cases? Do I try to talk to this person if he or she is awake, or is anonymity the order of the day? Who cares? I don't feel much like making small talk with a total stranger, anyhow.* My musings were interrupted by the arrival of a nurse.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully.

"Already?"

"My goodness, yes. It's after six."

"That late, huh?" I said.

"If you're feeling well enough for sarcasm, you must be feeling better."

"I don't know about that, but I did sleep through the night for the first time since I got here."

"Sleep is the best medicine," she quoted.

"I wonder who said that?"

"Somebody famous, probably."

She scurried about, checking me, then turned her attention to the other bed. The patient occupying it was evidently asleep or comatose, because she clucked her tongue a few times while she checked things but didn't utter a word. Her departure was followed by the arrival of the surgeon, who did and said the usual things. *Geez, we had an identical conversation yesterday morning. I really don't like this place.*

“Feeling better this morning, babe?” I heard Marco’s familiar voice ask before I registered his presence.

“As I told the nurse, I’m not sure. At least I slept better.”

He gave me a kiss, then placed my laptop on the small table next to the bed. *Do they call those things night stands when they’re in hospitals?*

“Thanks. At least that will give me something to do: I can spend all day sending you annoying e-mails, for example.”

“Knock yourself out,” he said, “but don’t make me have to put you on my ‘blocked sender’ list. I understand you’re being moved later today.”

“So they tell me,” I said,

“A private room might be a bit more peaceful, and there’ll certainly be less activity at night.”

“Yeah.”

We visited for quite a while, and before he left to begin his shift, he made sure that I could reach the laptop—tethered to wires and things as I was. By the time they came to move me to a private room, I was more than ready—my new roommate was a moaner and a screamer. *How could he possibly be in that much pain? Isn’t that what drugs are for? I was dying to ask someone, but could hardly do so with the guy lying there.* When I was settled in my new room, I decided to ask the question that had been bugging me all afternoon.

“What’s wrong with the patient in the other bed in the ICU Ward I just left?” I asked the orderly who got me settled in my new room. “The sound effects were something else. Doesn’t he have any pain medication?”

“Oh, he has medication, all right, but he refuses to take it. They’ll probably give him an injection this evening, whether he wants one or not.”

“I can’t imagine someone deliberately refusing pain medication.”

“It happens all the time,” he said.

He left the room, and I lay there reflecting on the vagaries of human nature for a while. I had just retrieved my laptop and was about to open it when I received two surprise visitors.

“Good afternoon, Dani,” the Duke said.

“How are you?” Angelina said.

“Oh, my,” I said. “A visit from the Duke and *la Duchessa*, this is an

honor. Please, have a seat.”

“We cannot stay long,” the Duke said, “but Angelina wanted to see you, and I have to ask you an important question.”

“Ask.”

“If someone were to prowl around your laboratory in your absence, would they see or discover anything that they should not?”

“No, Sir. When I use the computer, I actually log onto a secure server in the castle, so there is nothing on the hard drive that would interest anyone. All of the test results are in the lab, but the conclusions formed from them are in the computer. For that matter, nobody else has the combination to the lock which opens the door to my inner lab and office. The cleaning crew only does their thing when I’m there.”

“I thought as much,” he said, “but I thought it best to be certain.”

“You’re not thinking of replacing me, are you?” I said.

“Certainly not, it is just that an unattended suite of rooms is a tempting target for the curious.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Dani,” Angelina said, “you didn’t answer my question when I asked you how you were.”

“They tell me that I’m getting better, but it’s hard to tell from my vantage point.”

“That makes sense,” she said.

“Has your grandmother gone back to Calabria?” I said.

“No, she hasn’t. Maria is needed down there, and will be leaving tomorrow, but I’ve persuaded Grandmama to stay for a while.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Everyone needs a Grandmother or two in their lives.”

“Do you have grandparents?” she said.

“My paternal grandparents are dead, and my maternal grandparents pretty much washed their hands of me when I introduced Marco to them as my boyfriend thirteen years ago. I used to contrive to run in to my grandmother in her neighborhood on Saturdays once in a while, and she’d let me take her to lunch. It always had to appear to be an accident, of course—she was much too rigid in her beliefs to actually plan such a meeting.”

“That’s awful,” she said.

“It’s their loss.”

“So it is, but it’s still awful.”

“Were we interrupting something?” the Duke said.

“No, Sir. I was just about to use my laptop to relieve the boredom, that’s all.”

They stayed and visited for quite a while, and I found it surprisingly enjoyable. Angelina even kissed me before they left.

“I’ll be back,” she said, “I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

I enjoyed their visit but was shocked when I realized that it had worn me out. *Shit! I guess I really am sick after all, if lying in bed for thirty minutes doing nothing but talking to people is exhausting.* Armed with that realization, I took refuge in a nap and slept until dinner was served.



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CHAPTER 18

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*Marco*

AFTER I left Dani's room, I paid a visit to Malcolm, as I needed to give him a heads-up on my schedule for the next few days. Then I made my rounds in the hospital, which, since I only had two patients currently hospitalized, didn't take long. Late in the afternoon two days later, I went to the airport to personally greet my first two visitors. I gave Grandmother her usual hug after she walked up to me, then I shook Father Rinaldo's proffered hand.

"Thank you both for coming," I said. "This really means a lot to me, and I'm sure it will to Dani as well."

"How could we refuse?" Grandmother said. "Dani is, after all, family, and I hope and pray that your plan for his reconciliation with his family succeeds."

"Me too," I said. "Would you like to visit him in the hospital before we go up to the house?"

"If you don't mind," she said, "I think I would prefer to go to your house and take a nap first."

"I will accompany la Contessa," Father Rinaldo said.

"No problem," I said. "Your bags are in the car, so let's go."

"You have a beautiful home, Conte Marco," Father Rinaldo said as the car approached the house.

"Thank you. We have really enjoyed it."

"I can tell you from experience," Grandmother said, "that the sound of the waterfall is absolutely wonderful and soothing."

As I led them upstairs to their rooms, I said, "Why don't we plan on a visit to the hospital after dinner?"

“That will be fine,” Grandmother said.

“I’ll be in the den if you need me,” I said after I had shown them to their respective rooms.

“Thank you, Marco,” Grandmother said, “you are a good host. By the way, where are the children?”

“We just moved back up here from the castle. They’ll be with us for dinner.”

Sometime later I heard footsteps in the hallway, and when I investigated, I found Father Rinaldo admiring the living room.

“This is a marvelous house,” he said.

“We worked very hard to find just the right design,” I said. “Have you seen the terrace?”

“Not yet, but I was sort of headed in that direction.”

“Allow me.”

I led him to one of the many doors that opened onto the terrace. The sound of the waterfall, which was somewhat muffled in the house, became a constant roar the minute the door was opened. The terrace was covered but not screened, although one end of it was made somewhat private by a trellis currently covered with flowering vines.

“That is a wonderfully restful sound,” he said.

“Best lullaby in the world,” I said. “This time of the year, we often sleep with the sliding glass doors off our bedroom open, just for the sound. Can I offer you something to drink?”

“Thank you, no. I’ll wait for dinner, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly. Make yourself at home—I’m going to go back to what I was doing.”

## CHAPTER 19

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*Dani*

I SPENT two days alternating between the occasional visitor and a state of boredom, the boredom increasing with each passing day. Thursday evening brought a change in the pattern. Shortly after dinner, Marco arrived with a couple of surprises.

“Signora Contessa and Father Rinaldo,” I said, “this is a pleasant surprise. What brings the two of you to Aragoni?”

“We came to see you,” she said. “Is that not reason enough?”

“Surprise, surprise,” Marco said.

“Wow, two surprises in one week.”

“Two surprises? What was the other one?” he said.

“The Duke and Duchess of Aragoni were here Tuesday afternoon shortly after I was moved to this room.”

“You failed to mention that to me,” he said, “but good for them. And for your information, I had nothing to do with it.”

“I think it was mostly Angelina’s doing, but it was nice of them, no matter what the reason, and they stayed for quite a while. Is there some medical reason, Dr. d’Argenzio, which would explain why something like a twenty- or thirty-minute visit was exhausting.”

“There’s a simple answer for that, Dr. Rosati. Your body has taken a beating; your system isn’t functioning properly; and last, but certainly not least, your remaining kidney isn’t doing its job either.”

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say,” I said.

“Meanwhile,” he said, “enjoy your visitors, and if you get tired, let us

know.”

“By all means, let us know,” la Contessa said. “We did not come here to cause problems for you.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “Unlike most problems, this one is very welcome. It’s kind of boring around here, after all.”

They stayed nearly an hour, by which time I was feeling very tired. Marco, from whom I could never hide anything, sensed it and called a halt to the visit.

“I think it’s past time for us to go,” he said, “but we’ll be back tomorrow afternoon, okay?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

He kissed me, and to my surprise, so did his grandmother—only she kissed me on the cheek. Father Rinaldo contented himself with a handshake, followed by a short benediction, and the three of them left.

## CHAPTER 20

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### *Marco*

WHEN it became obvious that our visit was wearing Dani out, I saw to it that we left the room so that he could rest. Neither Grandmother nor Father Rinaldo said a word until we were back in the car and headed up the mountain.

“Marco,” Grandmother said, “this business of Dani tiring so easily is not a good sign, yes?”

“No, it’s not. It’s not good at all.”

“I will pray for his recovery as soon as we are back at your house,” Father Rinaldo said.

“Thank you, Father.”

“It is what I do.”

“Thank you anyway.”

When we walked into the house, the sounds from upstairs told us that the tribe had arrived, and they were a welcome diversion. Grandmother and I spent considerable time with the boys and helped Lucia tuck them in for the night. Then we went downstairs to the den, where we found Father Rinaldo sitting quietly with an open Bible in his lap.

“Anyone care for a nightcap?” I said.

“A Cognac would be nice,” Grandmother said.

“Father?”

“The same, if you please.”

We sat quietly sipping for a few minutes, and then Grandmother said, “What time will the plane be here in the morning?”

“It lands at eight, so if it’s on time, our visitors will be here around eight thirty.”

“And will you take them straight to the hospital?”

“No, Ma’am. Even if they managed to sleep during the flight, they’ll be tired and perhaps even a bit jetlagged. I intend to bring them here to the house and persuade them to rest and freshen up before we go to the hospital.”

“Will they be hungry?”

“Not unless they refuse breakfast on the plane.”

“Very good,” she said. “I believe I will call it a night.”

“If you don’t mind,” Father Rinaldo said, “I’d like to go out onto the terrace again. I find the sound of the waterfall quite conducive to meditation.”

“Help yourself,” I said.

My guests and I had breakfast with the boys the next morning, which was probably a unique experience for Father Rinaldo. During breakfast I received a cell phone call letting me know that the flight would land at eight as scheduled, and the cars would be at the house by seven thirty to take me to the airport and meet the plane—cars plural because there were four passengers on the plane. I was waiting at the door when the cars arrived.

“Good morning, Modesto,” I said when he emerged from the driver’s seat of the first car. “How did you get drafted for this assignment?”

“Il Duca ordered it,” he said.

“Sorry about that.”

“No need to be sorry, Marco. This is what I do for the family. Are you ready to go to the airport?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then hop in and we’ll be on our way.”

When we passed through the tunnel, I said, “Are we taking extra precautions today?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.”

I waited patiently in the hangar for the plane to be towed in and the door closed. William and Henry were the first passengers to disembark, and they turned to assist the two women if it was needed. Mrs. Piccioni appeared to be the same little old lady that she had been when I had last seen her thirteen

years previously, but Dani's mother had quite visibly aged over that same period of time, and was beginning to resemble a slightly younger version of her mother—short, running to plump, gray hair, and a face with sharp but not unkind features.

"William, Henry," I said, "it's so good to see you again."

"You too, Marco," William said, "even if the circumstances aren't ideal."

I hugged both of the cousins.

"Marco," William said, "I believe you know Mrs. Rosati and Mrs. Piccioni."

"We've met," I said, "but it was many years ago. How was your trip, ladies?"

"Long," Mrs. Piccioni said.

"Yes," Mrs. Rosati said.

"As soon as your bags are in the cars," I said, "we'll take you up to our house. After that many hours in the air, you probably want to freshen up a bit before we go to the hospital."

"Thank you," Mrs. Rosati said.

The cousins rode in one car, and I rode in the car with the two women. What little conversation we had was very strained, but the first sight of our house broke the ice just a little.

"What a lovely house," Mrs. Piccioni said.

"What a beautiful location," Mrs. Rosati said.

When I led them into the living room, Grandmother and Father Rinaldo stood. "Ladies," I said, "may I present my grandmother *la Contessa di Conti*, and Father Rinaldo, who has served as parish priest in Conti for many years.

"Grandmother, Father Rinaldo, this is Dani's mother, Mrs. Rosati, and her mother, Mrs. Piccioni."

Greetings were exchanged, and Lucia chose that moment to bring the boys in from the terrace where they had been playing. "And these noisy little fellows," I said, "are Marcus, Bernardo, and Giovanni."

"Are they yours?" Mrs. Rosati said.

"I'm their biological father, but for all practical purposes they are both Dani's and mine. Their nanny is my cousin Lucia from Sicily."

It got a little noisy for a few minutes; then I said, “Lucia, why don’t you take the boys somewhere just long enough for me to show our guests to their rooms?”

“Certainly, Cousin Marco,” she said, and she herded the boys to the kitchen with promises of juice and crackers.

“I’m sorry, guys,” I said to William and Henry, “you sort of got lost in the shuffle. Grandmother, Father Rinaldo, these gentlemen are very good friends of Dani’s and mine from Boston—William and Henry Lane.”

When the handshakes were over, Henry said, “Marco, why don’t we help you carry the ladies’ bags upstairs.”

“Right,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We got the women’s bags situated in their rooms, and William and Henry said goodbye to them. “You gentlemen aren’t staying here?” Mrs. Rosati said.

“Ma’am,” Henry said, “it’s a big house, but not that big. William and I are staying in Marco and Dani’s apartment in the castle. We’ll see you later at the hospital and later still for dinner.”

“I’m glad you reminded me, Henry,” I said, handing him two plastic cards. “Here are your keys. I believe you know where everything is, right?”

“Absolutely,” Henry said. “We’re going to change clothes, have a soak in the baths, followed by a massage and then a short nap. See you later.”

“Ladies,” I said, “I think you’ll find everything you need in your rooms. Lunch will be served at one, and then we’ll head down the mountain to the hospital. Are your watches set for local time?”

“One of the Lanes reminded us about that on the plane,” Mrs. Rosati said. “Thank you.”

I followed William and Henry down the stairs to the car. “So far so good,” I said.

“Having a genuine Countess and a parish priest on hand was a master stroke of theater on your part, Marco,” Henry said.

“Yeah, if you look at it that way, I guess it was. Enjoy the baths, guys, and I’ll see you later.”

I returned to the living room, where Grandmother and Father Rinaldo were still sitting. “Your two friends from Boston,” Grandmother said, “are they brothers?”



“No, Ma’am, they’re cousins. Their fathers are identical twin brothers.”

“They have the look of old wealth about them,” she said.

“And well they should. Their family is very old New England money. They were friends of mine almost from the first day of prep school.”

“I do not understand the term ‘prep school’.”

“A preparatory high school is a school—in this case, a boarding school—which prepares students for college. We were at Groton, which is in New England and run by the Episcopal Church. Prep schools in the States are not unlike Eton, Harrow, and other schools in England.”

“I have heard of them,” she said. “Your two female guests are very tense.”

“I’m not surprised. The last time I saw them was thirteen years ago when Dani introduced me to them as his boyfriend. There was a great deal of screaming and yelling on their part, and many unfortunate things were said.”

“That is so sad.”

“True, but it was many years ago and I’ve gotten over it.”

The two women appeared downstairs promptly at one, and the presence of three little boys provided a wonderful distraction. It might have been wishful thinking on my part, but I thought I detected a slight thaw in attitude on the part of the ladies. After lunch, the five of us got in the van, and Modesto drove us to the hospital. I noted that we had a lead car and a following car all the way there. When we entered his room, Dani looked up in stunned surprise.

“Mom, Grandma, what are you doing here,” he said. “Did you come all this way to gloat and tell me that God has finally punished me after all these years for being gay?”

The two women stood in shocked silence at his outburst, and I quickly held a finger up, asking for silence before I turned to the patient and said sharply, “Dani, your mother and your grandmother have come all this way to see you. Moreover, they’ve promised to be on their best behavior, and I expect no less from you.”

“Of course they’ll behave,” he said somewhat nastily. “If they don’t, you can make one phone call and have them thrown out of the country. What are you gonna do to me if I don’t shut up, Conte Marco?”

“The same thing I always do to shut you up, namely this.”

I bent down and kissed him totally and thoroughly, then stepped back from the bed and looked at my guests.

"I don't know what's going on here," I said, "but bear with me while I get to the bottom of it."

Turning back to Dani, I said, "Okay, Danilo Rosati, that was unworthy of you—what's going on? Last time I saw you, you were in pretty good spirits, so talk."

"My doctor was here just before lunch."

"And?"

"He sort of dropped a little bomb in my lap."

"What?" I said.

"My one functioning kidney is not only not getting better, it's"—his voice broke—"getting worse."

"Oh, babe, I'm sorry, but we'll get you through this. I'll call Malcolm and see if I can get you moved up on the list right now."

"Thanks. I have my first dialysis session in the morning."

The tears were flowing steadily, so I grabbed some tissues from the box beside the bed and wiped his eyes. "Let me get something to wash your face with. Now, say hello to your visitors, and be nice, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Rinaldo," Grandmother said, "I think I saw a chapel downstairs. Why don't you and I go down there and pray for Danilo's swift recovery?"

"After you, Signora Contessa," he said.

They left, and I went into the adjacent bathroom and ran some warm water over a face cloth. Carrying it and a towel, I stepped back into Dani's room. His mother was standing by the bed, and his grandmother was sitting in the chair nearest to it, holding Dani's hand. Mrs. Rosati saw the items in my hands and said, "I'll do it. It won't be the first time I've washed his face."

I handed them to her and went to sit on the other side of the bed until she finished the task of washing and drying Dani's face and handed me the face cloth and towel, which I quickly returned to the bathroom. Dani hadn't uttered a single word the entire time his face was being washed, and I took that as a good sign. The conversation between Dani and the two women started slowly and awkwardly. It was extremely guarded at first but eventually became almost cordial, though with undertones of wariness. I was on the alert

for any evidence of phoniness on the part of the two women, but if there was any of that, it was beyond my detection capabilities. By the time Grandmother and Father Rinaldo returned to the room, the atmosphere seemed almost normal.

Grandmother said a few words to Dani and joined the conversation briefly. Then she said, "Marco, I don't think Rinaldo and I are needed here. Can you arrange for us to be driven back to your house?"

"Certainly, Grandmother," I said. "I'll go make the call right now."

I went into the corridor to call for a driver, and when I returned to the room, I said, "The car will be at the door by the time we get downstairs."

"We?" she said. "Surely you're not leaving."

"Of course not, Grandmother, but I'll escort you and Father Rinaldo downstairs and see you safely to the car."

She walked over to the bed, bent down, and kissed Dani on the cheek. "I will see you tomorrow, Danilo," she said. "Meanwhile, enjoy your visitors."

"Thank you, Signora Contessa," Dani said.

Father Rinaldo shook Dani's hand, blessed him, and followed Grandmother and myself out of the room. We rode the elevator down in silence, and the silence continued until I opened the car door for Grandmother.

"Marco," she said, "I truly think it will be all right now between Danilo and his family."

"I certainly hope so. I'll see you at dinner."

The car left, and I went back upstairs and walked into the middle of Dani and his mother talking about old times. I took that as another good sign and resumed my seat. "Is everybody staying at our house?" Dani said.

"Not quite. William and Henry are in our apartment in the castle."

"William and Henry are here?"

"I asked them to contact your mother and arrange for this trip at the other end, and they decided to come along. They'll be in to see you at some point."

"They are very nice young men," Mrs. Piccioni said.

"I called a lawyer I know and asked about them," Mrs. Rosati said. "He

told me that their family has been in New England for three hundred years.”

“So I’m told,” I said, “and William’s mother is a Cabot and Henry’s mother is a Lodge.

“How did you meet them?” she said.

“At Groton. We were in the same classes from eighth grade until we graduated.”

“Your grandmother is a very nice lady,” Mrs. Piccioni said.

“Yes, she is. We’ve only known her for about five years, but in that time Dani and I have both grown very fond of her.”

“You didn’t know your own grandmother until five years ago?” she said.

I gave them the short version of my mother’s sad history, ending with Grandmother’s arrival at our table in the hotel in Conti on our first visit there.

“The first thing she said when she met Marco,” Dani said, “was ‘you have your mother’s eyes’.”

“Why did you call him, what was it, Conte Marco, Dani?” his mother said.

“Because when his uncle drove over a cliff with his two children in the car, Marco inherited the title of Conte di Conti and he had to take over the Conti family businesses.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and that was the beginning of the problem that put you in that bed. The first thing I did when I took control of things in Conti was to replace the old auditors with a different firm. It turned out that the manager of our winery in the Piedmont region had been embezzling for years—he had even bribed some members of the old auditing firm to look the other way.”

“Don’t leave out the fact that he had ties to crime,” Dani said, “not to mention the fact that they blew up your father’s Learjet because we were supposed to be on it.”

“Yeah, there is that. Anyhow, the guy escaped from jail recently, and we’re absolutely certain that he’s responsible for the attack. Which explains why we’re surrounded by security people.”

“We’ve got company,” Dani said.

“Hello, Father, Angelina,” I said when I looked to see who had arrived.

“We are not interrupting anything, are we?” Father said.

“No, Sir. We’re just visiting. Excuse me; my manners seem to have slipped. Ladies, this is my father, il Duca d’Aragoni, and his lovely bride, la Duchessa. Father, Angelina, may I present Dani’s mother, Mrs. Rosati, and her mother, Mrs. Piccioni.”

Father chose that moment to go all European on us and kissed the ladies’ hands—to their great delight, I might add. “I trust you ladies are enjoying Marco and Dani’s home on the mountain,” Father said.

“Yes, we are,” Mrs. Rosati said.

“It’s a wonderful location,” Mrs. Piccioni said.

“It certainly is,” Angelina said. “Marcus and I spent the last few days of our honeymoon there. I fell in love with the sound of the waterfall, and he’s promised to build me a house just like it on a waterfall somewhere.”

“We will not disturb your visit any further,” Father said. “We were on our way to a restaurant and decided to stop by and issue a dinner invitation in person—in our apartment in the castle tomorrow night.”

“Thank you, Father,” I said. “We’ll be there.”

“As for you, young man,” Father said to Dani, “we need you fully functional and back on the job—and the sooner the better.”

“I’m working on it, Duke,” Dani said.

Angelina gave Dani a kiss, and I followed them out the door. When we were far enough down the hall to not be heard by the occupants of Dani’s room, Father asked, “How goes it?”

“It was pretty bad at first,” I said.

“Why?”

I explained.

“I am so sorry to hear that, Marco,” Father said. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Pray for a miracle?”

“I can do that, but now that I think about it, I may be useful in another way.”

“How?” I said.

“I have heard that donations can be made to certain organizations—donations which will ensure that names are moved more rapidly up the waiting list.”

“As a doctor, I can’t condone anything unethical; but as a man, I can hardly object.”

“Just so. Leave it to me.”

I said goodbye and returned to Dani’s room. Two minutes after I sat down in my chair I realized that he was sinking rapidly, so I stood.

“Ladies,” I said, “look at him—he’s worn out. I think it’s time we left, so the nurse can give him a sedative that will give him a good night’s rest.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Rosati said, “I can see that. Come, Mother, it’s time for us to go.”

“Marco,” Dani said, “do something for me.”

“Sure, what?”

“Be here in the morning when they do it.”

“Count on it,” I said.

I kissed him and walked away from the bed. Presumably his mother and grandmother did the same, but I chose not to watch. In the corridor I made a quick call and was assured that a car would be waiting.

## CHAPTER 21

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### *Marco*

BOTH my guests seemed to be lost in thought as we walked down the corridor from Dani's room. I stopped at the nurses' station long enough to tell the nurse on duty that Dani was ready for a sedative. "Thank you, Doctor," she said. "I'll take care of it."

In the elevator, Mrs. Rosati said, "I keep forgetting that you're a doctor, Marco. Do you have a specialty?"

"Internal medicine," I said, "or as they used to say, I'm a general practitioner."

"I suppose that makes it difficult for you when someone close to you is seriously ill. I mean, being a doctor you are more aware of what can happen than others would be."

"That's a very astute observation, and you're absolutely right. Where a layperson remains optimistic, a doctor tries to be optimistic but cannot help knowing what he knows."

The elevator arrived at the ground floor, and I led the women to the entrance where the car was waiting. On the way back to the house, the silence was eventually broken. "What are my grandson's chances of survival?" Mrs. Piccioni said.

"Dani is young, fairly fit, and extremely healthy," I said. "Add to that the fact that he has never smoked, used drugs, or for that matter, abused alcohol. All of those factors weigh heavily in his favor and increase his chances of survival long-term. That being said, finding a suitable donor for transplant is his best option."

"Aren't siblings good prospects for donors?" Mrs. Rosati said.

“There are too many variables to make that an absolute certainty, but it does increase the chances for a tissue match. However, Dani hasn’t been close to his siblings for many years.”

“True,” she said, “but life-or-death situations can change things.”

“No argument there,” I said.

She persisted, asking, “What would we have to do to find out if one of them is suitable?”

“When we go to the hospital tomorrow, I’ll introduce you to Dr. Malcolm Sanderson—he’s the hospital administrator and is a delightful expatriate Englishman. He can tell you what you need to do.”

“Thank you.”

When we arrived at the house, Grandmother and Father Rinaldo were waiting for us in the living room. “Dinner is ready to be served at any time,” Grandmother said. “In fact, Lucia and I are minutes away from feeding the boys—I know they are able to feed themselves, but a little help is always nice.”

“If you’ll tell the cook that we’re ready to eat,” I said, “we’ll go and wash up. Do you know if William and Henry are joining us?”

“They sent a message saying that they were going to eat at a favorite restaurant in the old quarter,” she said.

“That would be Poco. They were really taken with it when they were here before.”

We ate our dinner while watching Lucia supervise the boys’ meal with an occasional assist from Grandmother. “You said their names are Marcus, Bernardo, and Giovanni,” Mrs. Rosati said. “Marcus is, I take it, your father’s name?”

“Yes, and as you know, Bernardo is Dani’s middle name.”

“Who was Giovanni named after?”

“My father,” Grandmother said.

“Who is their mother?”

“A healthy young woman of eighteen,” I said, “who wanted very badly to go to college, but couldn’t afford it. Now she can.”

“What if she wants to see the kids one day, or they want to see her?”

“She signed a legally binding contract, and there can be no attempt at



contact until the boys are twenty-one.”

“And you can enforce such a contract?” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am. Then there’s the fact that she will be entitled to a final cash payment when they’re twenty-one, provided she’s kept her end of the agreement.”

“What if the boys want to track her down when they’re older?”

“I’ll make sure they honor the contract. When they’re twenty-one, if they want to look her up, the contract stipulates that initial contact must be made through a third party.”

“Why?” she said.

“For her protection. What if she’s married and/or has other children and hasn’t told anyone how she paid for her education?”

“I guess you do have to have a lot of safeguards, don’t you? Where were they born?”

“In Boston.”

“In Boston?” she parroted.

“Yes. William and Henry Lane contacted a clinic there that arranges for surrogate mothers.”

“You must have wanted children very badly.”

“Not at all. I had, in fact, never even considered having children.”

“Then why?” she said. “If I may ask.”

“My father pointed out to me the fact that Conti needed an heir, and Luciano, who is both my cousin and the managing director of the Conti Group, told me that people in Conti expected their new Conte to produce an heir.”

“Can you be the Conte di Conti and be Duke here in Aragoni as well after your father is gone?”

“I suppose I could, but I surely don’t want to. It’s bad enough being Conte; I have no desire to be Duke. Hopefully, Angelina will present him with a son or sons one day.”

“What’s wrong with being in charge?” Mrs. Piccioni said.

“Nothing,” I said, “if you’re so inclined. But I devoted much of the first half of my life to becoming a doctor, and that’s all I really want to do. I’ve spent most of the past six or seven weeks taking my father’s place in Council

meetings, and it's not much fun."

"Aragoni is ruled by a council of some sort, then?" Mrs. Rosati said.

"Make no mistake," I said, "Father is absolutely in charge of things. But there is a Council of twelve men, all of them relatives, who run the day-to-day operations of the Duchy as well as the various family businesses in other countries. Generally speaking, he lets them do things their own way, but I'm told that he will on occasion veto something they want to do if he thinks it's a really bad idea. The meetings are long, tedious, and generally boring. Some of the Council members seem to make a career out of talking things to death."

"Sounds like the US Congress when it's in full bloom," she said.

"Yes, I suppose it does. And to be honest, there are times when a lengthy debate is helpful. I've been told that when Hitler invaded Poland, the Council had spent years debating a proposal to allow a railway tunnel from Italy to France to be run through Aragoni. If the tunnel had been built, the Nazis could have easily invaded despite Aragoni's history of remaining neutral."

"How often do you visit Conti?" Mrs. Piccioni said.

"At first, Dani and I flew down there every weekend, but as soon as Luciano had a handle on things, we cut the visits back to every other weekend, and finally once a month."

"The people in Conti like to see Marco walking around the square with the boys," Grandmother said. "It is reassuring to them in many ways."

"I baptized them in my church," Father Rinaldo said, "with the help of an Anglican priest from Aragoni."

"Why Anglican?" Mrs. Rosati said.

"I'm not sure you want to go down that road," I said, "you might not like where it leads."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. There were two reasons—one of them simple, the other somewhat complicated. Dani blames the Catholic Church for his family's attitude toward him—that's the simple reason. I wanted nothing to do with the Church of Rome because of the fact that a Catholic priest was bribed to marry my mother to an abusive man whom she had never met—despite the fact that she was drugged at the time and there was no license. When my father finally found her, she—again because of the church—refused to ask for an annulment. In her eyes, married by a priest was

married regardless of the circumstances. The fact that she had already begun to descend into a form of dementia was an additional factor. In any case, Dani and I attended the Episcopal Church in the States—when our jobs and classes permitted; due to the large number of Brits here in the Duchy, the Anglican Church has a large presence. I was frankly against having them baptized in Conti for all the above reasons, but out of respect for my grandmother and the people of the town, I allowed it to happen. Sorry, Father, but that's how it is."

"My daughter was stubborn and often impetuous when she was young," Grandmother said.

Someone mercifully changed the subject, and the conversation moved on to happier topics. Finally, everyone began to yawn. "I know how tired you ladies must be," I said. "Goodness knows I've made that flight often enough to understand jetlag. May I suggest a good night's sleep?"

"I won't argue with that," Mrs. Piccioni said.

"Yes," her daughter said. "We'll see you in the morning."

"You might not see me until somewhat later," I said. "I have a few patients to see, and you heard me promise Dani to be there when he has his first dialysis."

"Would we be allowed to be there?" Mrs. Rosati said.

"Probably not the first time, which involves a medical procedure to prepare his body so that it can be hooked up to the machine. After that, the process is less complicated, and patients can read or converse, or even in his case use his laptop to pass the time."

"I understand."

"I'll arrange for a car to pick you up later in the morning as soon as he's ready for visitors."

"Thank you and good night," Mrs. Rosati said.

The two women left the dining room, and I slumped back in my chair.

"Everything seems to be under control," Grandmother said.

"Yeah. So why do I feel like I'm walking on eggshells during every conversation?"

"Because of the past, of course," she said. "They are clearly warming up to you."

"I guess. Lucia, can we help you get the boys upstairs and ready for bed?"

“Yes, thank you,” she said.

We—that is, Lucia, Grandmother, and myself—got the boys bathed and ready for bed. Grandmother read to them until they dozed off; then she joined Father Rinaldo and me in the den for a nightcap. When we built the house, Dani and I had the architect add a second-floor terrace facing the waterfall. The terrace was covered and in two sections, the longer of which served the guest rooms. The smaller terrace was private and was accessible only from the master bedroom. When I finally went upstairs to the master bedroom, I opened the sliding glass doors to the terrace, which allowed the sounds from the waterfall to permeate the bedroom. That being done, I crawled in bed and allowed myself to be lulled to sleep.

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CHAPTER 22

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*Dani*

THE shock of seeing Mom and Grandma and actually having a more or less normal conversation with them, had been the frosting on the cake of my day. In sum, I had been on an emotional roller coaster for hours and was more than happy to swallow the sleeping pill when it was delivered. I still couldn't believe that Marco had pulled off a feat that I would have deemed impossible—that of persuading two members of my family to come and visit. *I wonder if he told them I was literally at 'death's door'?* Whatever he had told them, or had asked William and Henry to tell them, it had certainly worked. *How the fuck do you pick up a relationship with your family after more than a dozen years?* With that happy question rattling around in my brain, I succumbed to the pill.

Somehow I once again slept through the night and didn't wake up until a few minutes before my doctor appeared in the room. "How are you this morning?" he said.

"Aren't you here to tell me that? In any case, I'll defer to your superior wisdom."

"I was afraid you might have reacted badly to yesterday afternoon's news."

"You could say that, given what happened after that."

"What happened?" he said.

"Dr. d'Argenzio pulled a fast one, that's what happened." I gave him a summary of the visit.

"Nothing like a crisis to pull a family together, even a long-estranged family," he said.

"I guess—only time will tell whether or not the situation is temporary or permanent."

"Let's have a look at you."

He did all the usual stuff and pronounced himself satisfied with my recovery.

"Does that mean I can go home?" I said. "Soon?"

"Let's wait and see how the first dialysis session goes. If it goes well, I might be able to discharge you tomorrow or the next day."

"Good. I miss my own bed, and the sound of the waterfall outside the window is much more soothing than the background noise in here."

"I should think so," he said.

"How is he this morning?" Marco asked from the doorway.

"Doing very well, actually, Dr. d'Argenzio," my doctor said. "Very well indeed."

"He says if I respond well to the dialysis, I might be able to go home tomorrow or the next day."

"Now that is good news," Marco said.

"Everything peaceful and quiet up on the mountain?" I said.

"Absolutely. Your mother and grandmother seem to be handling things very well. Being something of a pessimist, I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"Maybe it won't," I said.

"One can only hope. Your mother wanted to be here for the dialysis this morning, but I told her the first session involved some medical stuff and she wouldn't be admitted to the clinic."

"Thank God for that," I said. "I don't need to have anyone standing around wringing their hands."

"I'll check in on you downstairs after a bit," my doctor said. Then he left the room.

Marco walked over to the bed and kissed me for a long time. "Seriously, babe. How are you?"

"I got a good night's sleep, thanks to that little pill."

"Sleep is good," he said.

“How the fuck did you pull that off?”

“Pull what off?”

“Don’t be coy. Getting Mom and Grandma to come see me. Did you tell them I was dying or something?”

“Let’s just say that I didn’t soft-pedal any of the pertinent facts, and leave it at that, okay? Either William or Henry said having la Contessa and Father Rinaldo on hand was a master stroke of theater.”

“Yeah, it was. Thanks.”

“Are you all right with this joyful reunion thing?” he said.

“Reunion, yes. I’m not at all certain about the joyful part—I guess that depends on whether or not it lasts.”

“If you can keep a secret, I’ll tell you something your mother asked me after we left here yesterday.”

“Scout’s honor,” I said. “If you’ll let go of my good hand, I’ll even make the sign.”

“She asked me about the possibility of siblings being better candidates as donors.”

“No shit,” I said.

“Seriously. No shit.”

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth—that there are no guarantees. I also mentioned that since there was no love lost there, why bother, or words to that effect. She said something about life-and-death situations changing things, and I promised to put her in touch with Malcolm.”

“Damn. Yet another surprise.”

“Yep. Listen, babe, I’ve got to make rounds right now, but I’ll catch up with you downstairs.”

“Okay.”

“Love you,” he said after he thoroughly kissed me.

“Yeah, me too, you.”

*And I thought the emotional roller coaster ride had come to a halt. Wow.* While I waited to be taken downstairs, I reflected at length on the implications of his conversation with Mom.

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CHAPTER 23

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*Marco*

I LEFT Dani's room feeling somewhat better about his mental state—yesterday afternoon must have been hard for him. It didn't take me very long to see the few patients I had in the hospital; then I went to my office to catch up on correspondence and other matters. I had pretty much canceled all of my appointments for several days, given the crisis. In the middle of doing this, I remembered my promise to Mrs. Rosati, so I called upstairs to see if Malcolm was free. He was, so I hurried up to his office to catch him before he once again became un-free.

"Good morning, Marco," he said when I entered his office. "How goes it with Dani?"

"As well as can be expected. He had an emotional morning, followed by an emotional afternoon."

"His doctor called me, so I have a good idea about his emotional morning, but what happened yesterday afternoon?"

I told him about the visit in some detail.

"Imagine seeing his mother after all those years."

"Yeah, and his mother seems to think that one of his siblings will, after years of estrangement, step forward as a candidate for donor."

"Stranger things have happened," he said.

"True. In any case, I'll be introducing you to her later on today, and you can take it from there."

"No problem," he said.

"On a more serious matter, can we have a brief conversation—off the record, so to speak?"



“Certainly.”

“Father said something yesterday. He said that he had heard that making a donation to the right organization sometimes gets patients moved ahead on the waiting list. I told him that as a doctor I couldn’t condone that, but as a man I understood. Have you heard of such things?”

“Yes, I have. It happens more often than you might think. In any case, I wouldn’t worry about it—you can hardly be held responsible for any actions taken by il Duca. Actually, I can probably be of some assistance in that regard.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yes. I mentioned the surgeon that flies in from Switzerland when we need transplant surgery, did I not?”

“Yes, you did.”

“He has access to a private network which maintains a list of people needing transplants and matches them with potential donors. Money is a primary factor in getting things accomplished in those circles.”

“How is that possible?” I said.

“Primarily because here in Europe and other parts of the world, we’re not quite as stuffy about such things as our counterparts in the States.”

“Anything to make it happen faster is fine by me. I suppose I ought to feel guilty about it, but I don’t—at least, not enough so to matter.”

“That’s because you’re human. I wouldn’t give it a second thought.”

“Thanks, Malcolm. It looks as though Dani can go home in a day or two, so I might be able to get back on a normal schedule again.”

He dismissed my concerns with a wave of his hand, and I went back down to my office to finish what I had been doing. In fact, I kept plugging away at my backlog of reports and dictation until I was called to the clinic for Dani’s first session. When I got there, Dani was already on a gurney looking more than a little apprehensive.

“Good morning, Dr. d’Argenzio,” the nephrologist said. “We’re almost ready to get started.”

“You’re going to have to use a venous catheter, correct?” I said.

“It’s our only option. As you know, it can take months for a fistula to develop properly, even if the procedure to create it is successful, and that is only when the patient will allow it, and this patient has ruled it out.”

The AV fistula is created when an artery and vein are connected together (anastomosed) in such a way as to create a direct connection between them. This increases the pressure against the connected veins, and they compensate by expanding and hardening. It also increases the flow and diameter of the artery. After a few weeks, the large, thickened vein can be easily cannulated or have a needle placed in it. The AV fistula is the most successful type of access in use today. It was originally developed in 1966. With proper care, the fistula can last for many years.

"Dani!" I said. "Why? Surely you know the risks of repeatedly using the venous catheter."

"Yeah," he said, "but I'm hoping a donor will be found fairly quickly, and to me, letting them try and do the fistula thing is an admission of defeat."

"Because of what I told you earlier?" I said.

"Hardly that. I don't consider that to be even a remote possibility."

"I won't argue with you now," I said. "This isn't the time or the place."

"But you will argue about it later, right?"

"You know I will."

"Let's just get on with it before I change my mind," he said.

"Dani! Attitude... please...."

"Sorry."

"Dr. Rosati wants me to use a vein in his neck," the nephrologist said.

"So I can still use the baths," Dani said, before I could ask the obvious question. "When we sit on the bench in the *calidarium*, the water won't quite touch the incision.

It didn't take long for the catheter to be inserted, and despite the many procedures of various kinds that I had done and/or witnessed over the years, it wasn't easy to witness it being done to Dani. When he was finally hooked up to the machine, we both gave a sigh of relief.

"How're you doing, champ?" I said.

"Been better, been worse."

"Geez, Dani, you need to come up with a new line. That's gotta be at least the third time you've said that in as many days."

"Very funny."

I sat beside him and kept him talking until the process was complete,

then I followed as he was taken back to his room in a wheelchair. When he was settled down in his bed, I asked if he needed anything.

“Not now.”

“Good, then I’ll have a car sent for your mother and grandmother.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to take a little nap first,” he said.

“Your wish is my command. I’ll send the car in an hour, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

“God,” I said, “our bed is so empty without you in it.”

“I know. Maybe tomorrow night? Or the next night?”

“One can only hope.”

I kissed him, went back to my office, and made two phone calls—one to arrange for the car, and the other to inform Dani’s family. Task completed, I sank back in my chair, feeling worn out, so, acting mostly on impulse, I summoned another car and was driven to the castle. I went straight to the baths and sank with relief into the waters of the *calidarium*. I had been soaking for a while, eyes closed and almost dozing, when a nearby voice snapped me out of it.

“Playing hooky, are you, Marco?” Henry said.

I opened my eyes in time to see the cousins settle down on the bench beside me. “Not really,” I said. “I just sat with Dani while he had his first dialysis session, and when I got back to my office, I realized I was exhausted.”

“How’s he doing? We haven’t heard anything.”

“That’s right,” I said, “I’ve sort of neglected you guys, bad host that I am.”

“Don’t even go there, Marco,” William said. “You have absolutely nothing for which to apologize.”

I gave them a blow-by-blow account of everything that had happened since I last saw them.

“Damn,” William said. “Dani really had a rough afternoon, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but I think the family situation may actually be on the mend—at least to a certain extent. Are you guys enjoying the baths?”

“You know we are,” William said.

“So much so,” Henry said, “that we’re seriously considering going native and getting rid of the body hair like everyone else we see in here.”

“Except for the fact that it’s co-ed, this is a Roman Bath in every sense of the word,” I said, and glanced at the lights over the massage doors. “Will you guys excuse me? I’ve got just enough time for a massage before I have to get back to the hospital.”

“Go,” William said. “You need it.”

“Why don’t you go see Dani when you’re through here? I know he’d like that.”

“Tell us which tram to take and we’ll do it,” Henry said.

“I could send a car.”

“We like using the tram.”

“All right. Look for the one that says *l’ospedale*. If it’s headed toward the parking lot the trip will be shorter—if it’s going the other way you’ll have to ride around town in a huge circle before you get to the hospital.”

I exited the pool, pulled on my robe, and headed for the green light, which indicated that one of the two male masseurs was available. For once, the luck of the draw did not yield a massage by Andreas. On reflection I was grateful for that, because I barely knew the guy I was using and therefore wasn’t expected to talk, should I choose not to do so. I was back at the hospital just in time to greet Dani’s visitors as they got out of the car.

“Do you remember how to find Dani’s room, Mrs. Piccioni?” I said.

“Certainly.”

“Good, because your daughter and I are expected in the hospital administrator’s office.”

When we arrived in Malcolm’s reception area, the receptionist said, “He’s expecting you, Dr. d’Argenzio. Go right in.”

“Thank you, Marianna,” I said.

We entered Malcolm’s office, and I made the introductions. “I think we’ll be more comfortable at the little conference table,” Malcolm said, indicating a table in the corner of his office. We sat down, and Mrs. Rosati looked at Malcolm expectantly.

“Did Marco tell you why I’m here?” she finally said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Malcolm said, and he spent some time explaining the

process of selecting donors to her.

Finally, she said, "I think I understand the process. Who do we contact in Boston?"

"Marco," Malcolm said, "I think that's your department."

"Malcolm," I said, "I've been away from Mass General for nearly five years, but I can certainly find out. In fact, if you don't mind, I'll make the call right now."

"Go ahead," he said, pointing at the telephone.

I called the main number from memory, asked for someone by name, and got lucky—they were still in charge of that department. "Let me put you on the speaker," I said. "I have the hospital administrator and the mother of the patient with me."

I pushed the button and settled back to listen to the ensuing conversation. I guess I zoned out for a couple of minutes, because I heard Malcolm raise his voice.

"Marco, are you all right?" he said.

"Sorry, Malcolm. I was up early, and I haven't been sleeping as well as I should."

"Do you need something for it?" he said.

"Nothing you can prescribe."

"What the devil does that mean?"

"At the risk of offending Mrs. Rosati's sensibilities, Malcolm, the fact of the matter is that in fifteen years, Dani and I have never spent a single night apart from each other—until now."

"That's all right, then," he said. "When he comes home, all will be well."

"Yeah, it's a big house, and even with the noisy presence of three small boys, it seems very empty right now."

"Thank you, Dr. Sanderson," Mrs. Rosati said, changing the subject. "I appreciate all of your help."

"My pleasure, Ma'am. Dr. Rosati and Dr. d'Argenzio are two of my favorite people, and there isn't much that I wouldn't do for either of them."

When we got to Dani's room, I thought I detected a noticeable improvement in his appearance, or was that merely wishful thinking?

“Hi, Mom, Marco,” Dani said cheerfully. “What kept you?”

“I was just showing your mother around the hospital a little bit,” I said.

“Marco, you’re a terrible liar.”

“Yeah, I guess I am. I took her upstairs to Malcolm’s office and introduced her. Doesn’t that qualify as ‘showing her around’?”

“William, Henry,” Dani said. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Good to see you too,” William said as he entered the room followed by Henry, “although I certainly regret the circumstances.”

I settled in a chair on the opposite side of Dani’s bed from his grandmother and once again zoned out completely. This time I snapped out of it when someone began to nudge my shoulder. “What?” I said.

“Marco,” Henry said, “you’ve been asleep in that chair for ten minutes. Go home. Get some rest.”

“But....”

“William and I can take these ladies to lunch, then come back and visit a bit—if Dani’s up to it—and get them home. Now, go.”

“Okay,” I said, “you’ve convinced me. Do you know who to call for transport?”

“Your cousin gave us the number. Go.”

I leaned over, kissed Dani, and left. When I got home, everyone was having lunch and wanted me to join them. Pleading exhaustion, I went straight upstairs to bed, where I zonked out the minute my head hit the pillow—and managed to sleep until there was a knock at the door. I looked at the bedside clock, saw how much time had elapsed, and said, “Yes.”

“Marco,” William said, “are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Come on in.”

The door opened and William and Henry came into the room. “You look rested,” Henry said.

“I should hope so,” I said. “Apparently I’ve been asleep for nearly three hours.”

“That’s because your body needed it,” William said.

“Yeah, I guess. What I need now is a shower. Have I missed anything important? Are Dani and his family still playing nice?”

“You didn’t miss a thing, and yes, they are,” William said. “We had a nice visit with Dani after you left, then we took the ladies to lunch at our favorite restaurant, and here we are.”

“Did I tell you that you’re invited to dinner with my father and his bride this evening?”

“Yes, you did.”

“What’s everyone planning to do this afternoon?” I said.

“Well, the two ladies from Boston are having a bit of a lie-down,” Henry said, “and your grandmother and Father Rinaldo have been entertaining us out on the terrace.”

“Entertaining?”

“She’s a great old girl. Reminds us a lot of our grandmother. She and Father Rinaldo have been telling us about things in Conti ‘back in the day’, as they say.”

“Good. I’m glad everyone is enjoying themselves.”

“You’ve got that right. I only wish we could take that marvelous waterfall back home with us.”

“You could always find a place in New Hampshire,” I said. “That’s not too far from Boston.”

“Yes, we could. Actually, we’ve been talking about doing just that ever since we were here before.”

“Henry,” William said, “Marco wants to take a shower, so we need to leave.”

“Whatever for? You’ve seen all of me that there is to see—in the baths, remember? Have a seat, and I won’t be long.”

They sat in a pair of comfortable chairs, and I went into the bathroom. When I emerged, toweling my hair dry, they had disappeared. I got dressed, went downstairs, and headed for the terrace, where I found everyone except Dani’s family enjoying the view and the sound.

“Feel better?” Grandmother asked when I joined them.

“I certainly feel rested.”

“Mrs. Rosati said you very nearly went to sleep while she met with the hospital administrator, and these boys said that you actually did go to sleep in the hospital room.”

“Sorry. I guess I was a lot more tired than I realized.”

“There is no need to be sorry,” she said. “Your body was trying to tell you something; as a doctor you should know enough to listen to it.”

“Yeah.”

“Marco,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I think Rinaldo and I have accomplished what we set out to do when we came here.”

“That’s true, and I’m very grateful.”

“Good. That being the case, I think it’s time we returned to our respective homes.”

“If that’s what you wish to do,” I said, “I’ll go see what the plane’s schedule looks like.”

“It is what we need to do. You and Dani need some time with his family—there is still a lot of residual pain there, and a certain amount of anger, I think.”

“I can’t argue with that logic,” I said.

“I should hope not. I’ve really enjoyed my time with my great-grandsons, and I certainly look forward to coming back for a longer visit when the ‘inn’ is not quite so crowded.”

“Give me a minute to look up the schedule on the computer.”

I went to the den, booted my laptop, and checked the Gulfstream’s schedule. I found the information I needed and made a note on the appropriate place to add two stops to a planned flight.

Back on the terrace, I said, “You’re in luck. The jet has a scheduled flight to Rome tomorrow afternoon, so I’ve added stops in Conti and Siena to its itinerary.”

“Thank you, Marco,” she said.

“It is I who should thank you, Grandmother. I think the presence of both yourself and Father Rinaldo tipped the scales in our favor.”

“If you think so,” she said.

“I know so, Grandmother.”

“Are we going to stop by the hospital on the way to dinner?” she said.



“I think that would be a good idea,” I said, and told her about a little surprise I was planning.

“We’ll head back to the castle,” William said, “and meet you in the Duke’s building at the appropriate time.”

“Why don’t you come to the hospital with us,” I said. “It will make the surprise even more dramatic.”

“Sure,” he said. “We can do that.”

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CHAPTER 24

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*Dani*

UNTIL he totally zonked out sitting in the chair beside my bed, I hadn't realized just how tired Marco had looked for the past couple of days. It made me want to ask him a dozen questions, none of which I could possibly ask in the present company. So I was glad when he was literally ordered to go home and rest. I somehow managed to set my concerns about Marco aside so that I could enjoy my visitors, although in the case of Mom and Grandma, I was sort of expecting that the proverbial "other shoe" would eventually drop. By the time William and Henry ushered everyone else out the door to go to lunch, I was more than ready for a little peace and quiet. In fact, it was so peaceful and so quiet that I took a little nap—something I seemed to be doing a lot since this all began. I sort of dozed my way through the afternoon. Gert stopped in to see me shortly before her shift ended—Gert was always a trip, and I really adored the woman. Shortly after Gert stopped by, Andreas and Nick came into the room. They were really a cute couple, and I hoped that Andreas's reputation of wearing out his lovers after three or four years was unfounded. After that, I don't remember much, as I dropped off again.

"Shall we wake up sleeping beauty?" I heard a voice say, "or shall we simply go on to dinner?"

"Marco!" I said, snapping out of it. "Don't be silly. I can sleep anytime. Come on in and let me see everyone in their finery."

And they were in their finery. Marco was wearing his newest and best suit; the Lane cousins were, as always, walking advertisements for Brooks Brothers; la Contessa was quite elegant in black; Mom and Grandma were wearing what were, for them, fancy dresses; and even Father Rinaldo appeared to be clad in a brand new cassock.

"I wish I had a camera," I said.

“Not to worry,” Henry said, “we brought one.”

“I’ll go find an orderly to take a picture,” Marco said.

He disappeared for a couple of minutes, then returned with an orderly in tow and began to issue instructions for an appropriate pose. There wasn’t much they could all do except crowd around the bed and smile. The camera flashed a couple of times, and Marco thanked the orderly. All good things must come to an end, and eventually my visitors began to prepare for departure.

“I wish I could go with you,” I said.

“Surprise, surprise,” Marco said.

“What the heck does that mean?”

“I have special dispensation from your doctor, babe. You’re getting in a wheelchair and going with us.”

“Like this?” I said.

“Like that. Hospital gown and all. Well, I did bring you a robe from home if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Marco, you have no idea how much better that would make me feel.”

It took a while to get organized—fortunately I had been permanently disconnected from the various drips and the miserable catheter—and eventually I was wheeled down to the emergency entrance and into a van, which was equipped with a sort of hydraulic lift for wheelchair patients. Marco rode with me in the van, and the rest of the party were in two vehicles following us. When we arrived at il Castello, it took two trips of the elevator to get all of us upstairs, but we finally made it. Angelina answered the door and was immediately all over me with hugs.

“Dani,” she said, “you made it. I’m so glad. Come on in, all of you.”

She led us into the formal sitting room, where we spotted Gert and Concettina sitting in chairs opposite three men—Andreas, Nick, and the Duke.

“Hello, guys,” Gert said.

“Fancy meeting you here, Gert,” Marco said.

“Yeah. The Duchess wanted to have an even number at the table, and here I am.”

“Mrs. McClanahan,” Angelina said, “I invited you because you are a

good friend of Marco and Dani.”

“That too,” Gert said.

By the time the Duke and Angelina led us to the dining room and we took our places at the enormous table (there were, in all, fourteen of us at the table with room for another six or so diners), the ice had been well broken and everyone seemed comfortable.

“My goodness,” Mom said when she looked around the dining room, “this is a magnificent room.”

“It is beautiful,” Angelina said, “but a little bit old-fashioned.”

“She already has plans in place to redecorate everything,” the Duke said.

“That’s a bride’s prerogative, isn’t it?” Angelina said.

It was a memorable evening for a number of reasons, and there were no awkward moments. The closest thing to a bad moment was when Angelina introduced her grandmother and came within an inch of calling her by that title. She sort of stumbled verbally and came out with “my cousin Concettina” instead. Being aware that this was the first time that the Duke and Marco’s grandmother had ever met, I was a little concerned, but they handled their introduction nicely—if either of them harbored any resentment, they didn’t allow it to show. Mom and Grandma were beside themselves being in the presence of, respectively, a Duke and Duchess, as well as a Count and Countess, even if the Count in question was only Marco. When we sat down to dinner, I was concerned about the food, and Marco, sensitive to my thoughts as always, noticed it.

“Don’t worry about the food, babe,” he said. “It was prepared following very specific instructions from your doctor.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said, “because it certainly looks better than hospital food.”

Marco’s grandmother was sitting on the Duke’s left and immediately across the table from Marco and me, and I noticed her glancing at the Duke from time to time. Finally, she said, “Duca Marcus, you look very young to be the father of a man Marco’s age.”

When the two of them were introduced, age had trumped rank, and the Duke had graciously asked la Contessa to call him by his given name.

“I was in that uncertain age between boy and man when I met your daughter, and my family ages very well. Look at Marco—at thirty-five, he

still doesn't appear to be much past his majority, does he?"

"That is true," she said.

"I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I was over the events of thirty-odd years ago. I was planning to approach il Conte, identify myself, and make a formal offer of marriage. Unfortunately, Giulietta acted on impulse and went to see her father without telling me what she was about."

"I can understand that," she said, "my daughter was quite headstrong, and she could be more than a little impulsive at times. She thought she could persuade her father to do anything, but she crossed a line.... If I had not been down in Siena at the time...."

The Duke reached over and patted her hand. "We both have much to regret."

"That is true," she said, "but at least we have Marco, and thanks to your generosity, I still have my daughter."

"Had you already assumed the title at that time, Duke?" I said, hoping he would appreciate my setting up that bit of fiction.

"No, Dani. My father was, at the time, desperate to abdicate and retire, but I had begged him to allow me one more year of relative freedom—which is why I was wandering around Italy more or less incognito."

"Being il Duca d'Aragoni doesn't give you the freedom to do what you wish?"

"In terms of power, perhaps, but the duty and responsibilities that come with the title carry with them many constraints. My time is seldom truly my own."

The group was on the verge of following the Duke and his bride into the library for after-dinner drinks when I realized just how tired I was. "Marco," I said, "would you mind taking a break from the party and getting me back to the hospital?"

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Yeah, but I'm exhausted."

Mom and Grandma made noises about going with us, but I stopped them. "It's okay, Mom. I just want to go back to my bed. There's nothing you can do to help, and no need to miss out on anything because of me. Marco will be back shortly."

They relented, and after calling the driver of the van, he wheeled me

back to the elevator. The rear compartment of the van was separated from the driver by a partition, and I asked Marco to turn off the interior light.

“Why?” he said as he complied with my request.

“So you can kiss me without giving the driver a show.”

My wheelchair was locked in place adjacent to the bench seat he occupied, so he slid over and gave me a lengthy kiss.

“You don’t know how much I’ve missed this,” he said when he came up for air.

“Not half as much as I have.”

“Were you really exhausted, or was that a ruse?”

“Well, I am kinda tired, but mostly I just want to be alone with you for a while.”

“Works for me,” he said.

He got me settled into my bed in the hospital, kissed me again, and went back to the castle.

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CHAPTER 25

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*Marco*

I KISSED Dani one final time, left his room, and went back down to the hospital entrance where the van was waiting. By the time I got back to the ducal apartment, nearly an hour had passed. I wanted nothing more at that point than to go home and sleep, but I put on a happy face and walked into the library.

"Is everything all right at the hospital?" Henry said the minute he spotted me.

"Absolutely. He's probably sound asleep by now."

"Shouldn't the treatment he had this morning have made him better?" William said.

"Not at all," Gert said. "Even though the machine does all the work, it's normal for the patient to be exhausted afterward."

"Have a glass of wine, my boy," Father said as he handed one to me.

"Thanks."

I settled down on a sofa next to Gert and said, "Did I miss anything important?"

"Not really," she said. "We stopped talking about you five minutes before you walked through that door."

"Thanks, I think."

"Is Dani going to be able to go home tomorrow?" Mrs. Rosati said.

"Probably," I said, "but that depends on what his doctor says in the morning."

"Why aren't you his doctor?" she said.

"I'm not a nephrologist, but even if I were, it isn't a good idea for doctors to take on loved ones as patients in life-or-death situations. Your objectivity can easily become clouded by your feelings."

"That makes sense," she said.

"Gert," I said, changing the subject, "will your kids be coming here to ski this winter? They're more than welcome to stay at our house again."

"Yes, they will, although I don't know precisely when. In another year I plan to have a house on the mountain myself."

"Really? That's great."

"Yeah," Andreas said, "she purchased a vacant lot near us."

"I finally sold my place in Boston," Gert said.

"I guess that means you really are a permanent resident now," I said.

"You bet. Moving here was the best decision I ever made. I love it here, and I've especially enjoyed getting to know my mother's family down in Italy."

I heard a chime in the distance but paid no attention until Stefano entered the room and walked up to where Father was sitting. He bent down and whispered something in Father's ear, which caused him to stand up quickly. "Marco," he said, "will you join Stefano and me in the other room for a minute?"

"Sure," I said, and I got up and followed them from the library.

When we got to Father's office, he asked that we sit. "All right, Stefano," Father said, "tell us the whole story."

"There isn't all that much to tell, really. Signor Nepote has been apprehended. He was trying to slip across the border on one of the trails across the mountains and suffered a fall. A routine patrol literally stumbled over him earlier this evening. They also found the body of another man nearby—presumably the man who was with him at the tunnel."

"Where is he now?" Father said.

"They treated his injuries at the hospital, and he is in an isolation cell in the old castle."

"Is he talking?" I said.

"Not yet, but he will."

"How?"



“Our people will use a combination of drugs and hypnosis if they cannot scare a confession out of him.”

“Scare?” I parroted.

“He will be taken into a room which contains only a stool and a noose hanging from the ceiling. He will be placed on the stool, the noose put around his neck, and he will be blindfolded. I believe it is called a ‘mock execution’, and it can be a very effective tool.”

“No kidding? Do you use it often?”

“I think the last time was when we caught a couple of Nazi spies trying to slip into the Duchy during the war.”

“Does Aragoni have the death penalty?” I said.

“Yes, we do,” Father said, “which is why we will refuse to extradite him to Italy if it comes to that.”

“That works for me,” I said.

“Isn’t that rather bloodthirsty, coming from a healer?” Stefano said.

“Perhaps, but this man and/or his accomplices have tried to kill me twice—that puts things in a different perspective. And I haven’t forgotten the pilot and co-pilot of the jet—he succeeded in killing them.”

“Just so,” Father said. “Thank you, Stefano. Please keep us informed as things progress.”

“Yes,” I said, “and I’ll really be interested to learn if his accomplices have any further interest in me.”

“I think we’ll have a few answers by this time tomorrow,” Stefano said.

He left, and Father and I returned to the library. The minute she spotted us, Angelina said, “What’s happening, Marcus?”

“The man responsible for the attack on Marco and Dani has been apprehended,” Father said.

“That’s good news,” she said.

“How good it is depends upon how much information we can obtain from him about his accomplices,” Father said.

“Will he talk?” she said.

“Our people are very skilled in the use of so-called ‘truth’ drugs,” Father said, “I think he will.”

“I think I need one more glass of wine,” I said, “and I’ll be ready to call it a night.”

A round of nightcaps was poured and consumed, and we prepared to leave. When there were that many guests, the preparations took several minutes, but we were finally in the anteroom waiting for the elevator to arrive.

“William,” I said, “do you and Henry know how to get back to the apartment from here?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then we’ll see you tomorrow evening at our house,” I said.

“Count on it.”

“Gert, do you have a ride home?” I said.

“Nick and I brought her here,” Andreas said, “and we’ll get her home safely.”

“That takes care of everyone, then,” I said, and I stepped into the elevator car with Grandmother and my other houseguests.

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CHAPTER 26

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*Dani*

A FEW minutes after Marco left my room, a nurse's aide appeared with my nightly pill. I swallowed it gratefully and settled back to go to sleep. Once again, I slept through the night (strange how you can get accustomed to sleeping through odd noises) and didn't wake up until shortly before my doctor appeared—with Marco on his heels. The doctor went through his usual routine, made a few notes on the clipboard he was holding, and stepped back a couple of paces.

"Are you ready to go home?" he said.

"Does a bear sh...? Yes, I am."

"Then I'll sign off on the paperwork and leave it to Dr. d'Argenzio to set the wheels in motion."

"That's it?"

"What did you expect," Marco asked, "a fanfare?"

"No, fool. I was thinking that somebody would have a shitload of instructions for me."

"There will be a number of pamphlets, forms, and other paperwork for you, never fear," my doctor said. "In fact, I can almost promise you enough reading material to last for a couple of days."

"Be careful what you wish for," Marco quoted.

"Yeah. Thank you, Doctor."

The doctor left the room, and I looked at Marco. "What now?"

"I need to call for transportation and get you home. It's gonna be a very busy day."

“Why?”

“You’re coming home; Grandmother and Father Rinaldo are going to the airport after lunch; and, oh yeah, they captured Signor Piedmont Winery last night.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. Right now he’s in an isolation cell, hopefully contemplating his many sins. Sometime later today, they’ll be giving him some wonderful drugs which may well have him singing like a canary.”

“And if the canary doesn’t sing?”

“Ve haf our vays here in Aragoni,” he said, affecting a very bad accent.

“You mean?”

“No, I don’t mean torture, but they may stand him on a stool, put a noose around his neck, and blindfold him—in the hope that he will do something more than soil his undies at the prospect of being hanged by the neck until dead.”

“Good. If there was a medieval torture rack in the castle dungeon, I’d have him on it in a New York minute.”

“Yeah. Listen, babe, if you want to get out of here, I need to go set things in motion.”

“So go.”

He kissed me and left the room, and I settled back on the pillow to wait. I waited... and waited... and waited some more. Finally, an orderly appeared, pushing a wheelchair ahead of him—Marco was a few paces behind him.

“Finally!” I said.

“Dani,” Marco said, “hospitals, as you well know, are small bureaucracies with wheels that grind very slowly.”

“Yeah. Have those wheels finally ground me out of here?”

“As you see.” He pointed at the wheelchair.

“What are we waiting for, then?”

In no time I was in the wheelchair and being trundled down the corridor to the elevators. A car and driver were waiting for us at the entrance to the building, and I got out of the wheelchair and climbed into it.

“I feel as though I’ve been sprung from *durance vile*,” I said.

“Yeah, according to my patients, that’s a common reaction.”

When we approached the tunnel, I did my best to not look at the spot where “it” happened, but I couldn’t keep myself from looking and commenting.

“As Rumpole of the Bailey would say,” I said, “here we are at the *locus in quo*.”

“You must be feeling better if you’re making bad jokes.”

“What joke? It was merely an observation.”

We arrived at the house, and Marco helped me inside, where I was immediately surrounded by my well-meaning family.

“What do you need?” Grandma said.

“Can I help?” Mom said.

“Whoa!” I said. “Right now I’m going to climb the well-worn stairs and take a shower—I haven’t had anything but sponge baths for days. Wait until I’m safely in bed, then you can fuss over me, okay?”

“Are you up to climbing those steps?” Marco said.

“Only one way to find out. Let’s go.”

We made it to the master suite, and Marco helped me out of my robe and hospital gown. In the bathroom, I sank gratefully onto the tiled bench which ran across one end of the large stall shower and looked at him.

“Any precautions I need to take before the water is turned on?”

“I need to remove the dressings from your lower back, and I need to protect that opening in your neck where the catheter goes. Give me a minute or three.”

It took him a couple of minutes to arrange things to his satisfaction, but finally he said, “Okay, it’s show time.”

“Don’t you mean shower time?” I said.

“Yeah, that too.”

He stripped, turned on the tap for a minute, tested it, and said, “Ready or not, here it comes.”

It was, in a word, heavenly, and I sat under the warm spray for a long time after the soap had long since been washed away. Finally, Marco turned off the water and looked at me. “Feel clean now?”

“Yeah. Step forward a couple of feet.”

“You mean like this?” He eased forward until his erection was almost in my face.

“Yeah, like that,” I said.

Sometime later, when I had been toweled dry and was lying on my back in our bed, he crawled between my legs and looked down at me. “Your turn,” he said. “Damn, it’s like a briar patch down there.”

“Yeah, and it itches like the devil—we’ve missed our regular mutual shaving sessions.”

“We’ll get that taken care of later—I don’t think your adoring public can wait quite that long.”

Later still, when I was modestly clad in a pair of Marco’s favorite boxer-briefs and an extremely loose-fitting T-shirt with a V neck, he got dressed and went to the door. “Time to summon your fan club.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I lay back on the pillows, wondering who would make it up the stairs first. It’s a good thing I didn’t make a bet with myself, because my first visitors were already on the second floor. Lucia herded the boys into the room, and they began to fuss at her to lift them up onto the bed with me—it was a little too high for them to climb up on their own.

“Boys,” she said, clapping her hands to get their attention. “Listen to me—Papa Dani has been sick, and you absolutely must not climb all over him. Understand?”

Heads nodded in agreement, and she lifted them onto the bed one by one. Of course they were all over me immediately. I finally had to show them the incision in my throat to get them to stop pawing at me. “It hurts when you touch that,” I said, “so be careful, okay?”

By the time the older generation arrived in the room, the boys had calmed down and were lying beside me on the pillows. “Now, that’s a pretty picture,” Grandma said from the doorway.

“It certainly is one that I never expected to see,” Mom said.

*Not now, Mom. Please, not now.*

“Come on, boys,” Lucia said. “Papa Dani has other visitors now. You can come back and see him later.”

They needed no help getting down from the bed, and once down, they

obediently followed her from the room. Once they were out of the room, Mom said, "I can't get over how well those boys mind that girl."

"She has a way with kids," I said. "As I understand it, she has a number of much older siblings whose children she started caring for when she was quite young."

"How in the world did you find her?"

"The Duke has a far-flung family, and he sent out an appeal for a nanny. Evidently, there's a waiting list of family members who want to come live and work in the Duchy. She wanted to go to college, but her parents wouldn't allow her to live in a dormitory. They flew up here, spent a weekend looking us over, pronounced us worthy of keeping their daughter safe, and allowed her to live with us."

One of the best ways to lie is to tell just enough of the truth to make it sufficiently palatable that no further details are necessary. There had been an appeal for a nanny, but nothing came of it, and the problem had been solved by a chance conversation with Marco's cousin Pietro, who was also from Sicily and well acquainted with Lucia's parents.

"She says she wants to become a nurse when she finishes college," Grandma said. "I hope she becomes a pediatric nurse—she'd be good at it."

"Hello, Father Rinaldo, Signora Contessa," I said when I saw them enter the room, "welcome to the party."

"Dani!" Mom said. "It's a reunion of sorts, but hardly a party."

Marco's grandmother walked over to the bed and took my hand. "I must say," she said, "you are looking considerably more relaxed than I've seen you look in a while."

The twinkle in her eyes told me that she knew damn well why I was so relaxed. *You're a remarkable old girl, Signora Contessa.* "Thank you," I said. "Just being home and in my own bed makes all the difference in the world."

"Well," she said, "we won't keep you from your family. Right now Rinaldo and I must go and pack—we have to be ready to go to the airport immediately after lunch, but we'll look in on you again before we leave."

"You don't have to go," I said.

"Yes, we do. Rinaldo can only neglect his parish for so long, and I don't like to be away from the situation in Siena any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"What can I say, except thank you for coming."

The priest said a few pleasantries, blessed me, and followed her from the room.

“That is a remarkable woman,” Mom said.

“Yes, she is,” I said. “Marco and I have both become extremely fond of her. Where is he, by the way?”

“In the den using the computer.”

“Is there anything you need?” Grandma said.

“Now that I’m here, no.”

“Now that we’re alone,” Mom said, “I have to ask you a question.”

“Ask. I’ll answer it if I can.”

“You seem to be ‘living large’, as they say. What will become of you if something happens to Marco?”

“Absolutely nothing will happen to me, except that I will suffer from a great deal of loneliness. This property is in both of our names, and we have reciprocal wills—what’s his is mine and vice versa. Not to mention the fact that we took out a hefty mortgage to build this house. Did you think that I was some sort of kept boy?”

“Not really, but I don’t understand how you pay for everything.”

“Mom. You wouldn’t believe how much money we lab rats make—we’re not in the same league with doctors, but we’re paid quite well—I have two well-earned doctorates, after all. In addition to that, Marco draws a good salary from the Conti Group. For that matter, so do I. We even own some income property.”

“Do you guys have to pay for all those cars and drivers?” she said.

“No, we don’t. Marco is the son of a Duke, who is for all practical purposes the absolute ruler of this Duchy. As his heir, Marco gets all of the protection he needs, in much the same way the children of the British Monarch or the US President do. The only difference is that here in Aragoni, the taxpayers don’t have to pay for it—there are no taxes here. Actually, since we’ve only needed a lot of security since he became il Conte di Conti, the Conti Group is billed for most of the security and transportation.”

“No taxes? That doesn’t sound possible.”

“The Duchy owns and operates the two hydroelectric power plants that provide electricity for the entire area, as well as the water and sewer plants. The revenue from those utility operations is more than enough to pay for



police, firemen, streets and roads, and everything else.”

“His father must be a very wealthy man.”

“You have no idea.”

“The Duke’s wife was talking about having children—will they be a threat to Marco?” she said.

“Not at all—he has no desire to be Duke. In the fifteen years I’ve known him, all he’s ever wanted to be is a doctor. As far as he’s concerned, Angelina can have a dozen sons, especially if that decreases the possibility of him ever inheriting the title. Does that answer your questions?”

“I suppose it does. I’m just trying to understand how things fit together around here.”

“Mom,” I said, suddenly serious. “I promised Marco that I’d be good, but I have to ask—isn’t it a bit late for you to be getting worried about my welfare?”

“I guess I deserved that,” she said, “and I’m sorry for a lot of things, but it’s a lot to take in all at once.”

“I would say count your blessings. You’ve only missed out on thirteen years of my life, more or less. La Signora Contessa spent the better part of thirty years not knowing whether her only daughter was alive or dead, only to be reunited with what amounts to an empty shell. Most of the time when Marco and I visit them in Siena, his mother says something like, ‘Oh, look, Mama, it’s those nice boys who used to come see me in Florida’. He’s been dealing with his mother’s self-induced madness since he was a very small boy.”

“Yes. She told me that, along with a great many other things. I’m sorry I brought this up.”

“Then let it go, and be happy that I’m happy. And you’d have to be deaf, dumb, and blind to not see that I am.”

“Yes, I would. One more question while we’re at it.”

“Shoot.”

“How long have you known...”

“That I was gay?”

“Yes.”

“Since before puberty. I was one of the lucky ones in that I figured out

who I was and didn't let it drive me crazy with guilt. Do you remember Tommy Sarneli?"

"Sure," she said. "You and he were best friends for a very long time, and slept over at each other's houses a lot."

"True. What did you think when you heard giggling coming from my room late at night?"

"Just that you were being boys," she said.

"You don't know how right you were. We were 'being boys', but not in the sense that you meant it just now."

"You mean...."

"From the time we figured out how much fun it was," I said.

"That's a lot to take in. Whatever happened to him? He finally left home—and the neighborhood."

"He moved to San Francisco after college and got careless."

"I don't know what that means," she said.

"He got totally involved in the 'scene' out there but didn't always play safe. Last I heard, he was HIV positive but didn't have full-blown AIDS."

"If he's told his family about that, it's news to me."

"I don't think he's had any contact with them for a very long time. Sound familiar?"

She let out a huge sigh. "Yeah, it does."

"There's more," I said. "Remember Ray Cacci?"

"Sure. You don't mean that you and he...."

"Absolutely."

"But he got married... had kids...."

"Some guys never have what it takes to face up to who they are, so they do what they think is expected of them. Do people think that he's happy?"

"There's a lot of talk about trouble in that house. And it's known that he insists on going out 'with the boys', as they say, on Fridays or Saturdays."

"Exactly. He's out with the boys, only in his case it means he's prowling the gay bars looking for sex."

"I don't believe it," she said.

“Believe it or not, as you will. I’ve run into him at the Quincy Market once or twice, and all I know is what he told me.”

“This is all very confusing,” she said.

“I don’t doubt it, Mom. You’ve led a sheltered life in many ways.”

“Yes, I suppose I have.”

“You’re awfully quiet, Grandma.”

“What else is there to say?” Grandma said.

“Not a thing. You haven’t told me how long you guys can stay with us?”

“The invitation was open-ended,” Mom said, “but in any case, we can’t leave your father and grandfather to their own devices much longer than a week or ten days. Even with your sisters keeping an eye on things, both houses will be a disaster by the time we get home.”

“I don’t even want to know what their reaction is to all of this,” I said.

“No,” Mom said, “you probably don’t.”

“We’re gonna work on them when we get home,” Grandma said, “and see if a little attitude adjustment is possible.”

“Good luck with that,” I said.

“Good luck with what?” Marco asked from the doorway.

“Changing the attitudes of my father and grandfather,” I said.

“Oops, sorry I asked.”

“It’s okay,” I said, “we’ve been having a rather interesting conversation.”

“Really?” he said.

“Yeah. I think Mom kind of thought that I was your ‘boy toy’ or something like that.”

“Danilo!” she said. “I didn’t say that.”

“No,” I said, “but you were thinking it.”

“Well... only at first.”

He walked over to the bed, leaned down, and deliberately kissed me. Then he rubbed his fingers over my chin. “Lots of stubble there. We should have taken care of that while you were in the shower.”

“Doesn’t it qualify as what is loosely referred to as ‘designer stubble’?” I said.

“I don’t think so,” he said, “and even if it does, it’s gotta go.”

“Yeah, I agree, and the sooner the better.”

“First thing in the morning, I promise. Anyhow, before you distracted me, I was going to say that lunch is ready downstairs. Do you feel up to walking back down the stairs? I can bring it to you, if you like.”

“I think I can make it down the stairs and back up again,” I said. “I need to get back into a normal routine. Damn, I forgot to ask the doctor when I can go back to work.”

“He told me that you need at least a week or ten days to become accustomed to the dialysis before you attempt a full work schedule.”

“I’m gonna go stir-crazy,” I said.

“Isn’t there anything you can do from here on the computer?”

“Yeah, there is that. There are a ton of reports that need to be written, now that I think of it.”

“There you go.”

“Hand me a robe and slippers, and I’ll go downstairs with you.”

He retrieved a loose robe from the closet and placed a pair of slippers on the floor beside the bed.

“Need some help getting up?” he said.

“I’m not quite that bad off.”

“Knock yourself out, then.”

I pushed the sheet out of the way, sat up, swiveled around on the bed, and put my feet into the slippers. When I was standing, he held the robe while I slipped into it.

Mom’s jaw dropped when she saw the bright red boxer-briefs, which were quite form-fitting.

“Didn’t you ever see a guy in boxer-briefs before, Mom?” I asked as innocently as possible.

“Not that color and not that tight,” she said.

“Maybe you ought to buy a pair for Dad—it might spice things up in the bedroom. They sell them all over Italy, and here in Aragoni.”

“Danilo Rosati, watch your tongue.”

“Let’s go down to lunch,” Marco said, changing the subject. He didn’t crack a smile, but the crinkling in the corners of his eyes said it all.

Lunch was enjoyable, and I managed to make it back up the stairs almost unaided. When I was settled back in bed, I had a visitor—Marco’s grandmother came into the bedroom, and closed the door behind her.

“I just came to tell you goodbye,” she said.

“I appreciate your being here, and there’s no doubt in my mind that your presence had everything to do with keeping things from getting out of hand.”

“Dani,” she said, “the only difference between your female relations and myself is that they haven’t seen enough of the world to be able to put people and their relationships in proper perspective. Even though they live in an extremely large city, they stay in their little neighborhood and seldom venture outside of it.”

“That’s very true,” I said.

“And it has totally shaped their view of things. If I had spent my entire life in Siena, or for that matter Conti, I might have the same outlook on things. Your mother, grandmother, and I have had many long talks and, to give credit where it is due, Rinaldo has influenced them as well.”

“That’s remarkable, given his profession.”

“Not all men of the cloth follow the church’s party line on matters of the heart.”

“I guess so. Anyhow, I’m truly grateful, and I know Marco is as well. You do realize that we’ve both become very fond of you, don’t you?”

“That goes both ways,” she said.

She leaned over the bed and kissed me. “I expect I’ll see you in Siena or Conti in the not-too-distant future.”

“That you will.”

As soon as she had gone, Marco popped into the room long enough to tell me that he was going with them to the airport. “See you later,” he said.

“I’ll probably be asleep, but okay.”

## CHAPTER 27

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*Marco*

“YOU did not have to accompany us to the airport, Marco,” Grandmother said.

“Nobody has to do anything, Grandmother,” I said. “I chose to accompany you.”

“Thank you. When do you think we will see you in Siena again?”

“That’s kind of hard to predict, but certainly not until the situation here has stabilized.”

“That is quite understandable. I suppose there is no way to predict how long Dani will have to wait before a suitable donor can be found.”

“None whatever,” I said. “It’s all a function of finding a proper tissue match—and then there is the matter of the waiting list, although that’s not an insurmountable obstacle.”

“I do not understand.”

“I have recently learned that there are private networks who match donors and recipients for a fee.”

“And you would do that?”

“Grandmother, I will do whatever becomes necessary, within limits.”

“You sound like your grandfather when you say things like that.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?” I said.

“More or less, yes.”

“I’ll tell you what I told Dr. Sanderson when he mentioned the private group who arranges such things—as a doctor, the ethics of doing that are

troubling; but as a man, I will do what I must.”

“You weren’t educated by Jesuits, were you?” Father Rinaldo said.

“No, Sir. My school was run by the Episcopal Church, but I take your meaning.”

“I am familiar with that church,” he said.

“Father Rinaldo, I haven’t properly thanked you for all of your help.”

“It was nothing.”

“It was a great deal more than nothing. In fact, I’ll go so far as to say that without the presence and participation of both yourself and Grandmother, this visit by Dani’s family would not have succeeded.”

Before they boarded the plane, I hugged Grandmother and thanked her again for all her help. As I often did, I stood in the doorway of the hangar and watched the plane taxi down the runway and lift off into the skies.

In the car I said to the driver, “Renato, do you know where Salvatore lives?”

“Yes, Signor Conte, I do.”

“Take me there, please.”

He drove me into the city to an area near the old quarter and pulled up in front of a modest three-story building. “Salvatore’s apartment is number eight,” he said. “It’s on the top floor.”

“Great, let’s go see him.”

He followed me up the stairs to the third floor, which appeared to have only two apartments. I pressed the button beside the door of number eight and waited. It took a while, but the door was eventually opened to reveal an extremely startled Sal, barefoot and wearing only boxers. One arm was in a sling, and his muscular shoulder was bandaged.

“Conte Marco,” he said, “what are you doing here?”

“I came to see you. May we come in?”

“Certainly. Come in and have a seat.”

“If you don’t mind, Signor Conte,” Renato said, “I will stay outside the door and keep an eye on things.”

“As you wish.”

Sal led me into his apartment, closing the door behind us. I looked

around the living room with interest and saw that it was a spacious room with French doors at the opposite end which were open, revealing a balcony.

“Nice place you have, Sal,” I said.

“I like it very much. It’s much roomier than my apartment in Siena. I have two bedrooms here, where I only had one in Siena.”

“It’s a palace compared to some of the tiny apartments Dani and I lived in while we were going to college, and when I was doing my internship and residency.”

“It has more than enough room for me.”

“Why don’t you buy a house?” I said.

“Because I am saving my money and investing it against the time when I will have to start a new life.” One of the disadvantages of living for a very long time was that after forty or fifty years, people began to notice that you still appeared to be in your mid-thirties. This meant that every so often, a family member found it necessary to pull up stakes, establish himself elsewhere, and begin a new life.

“I’m sorry I didn’t see you again in the hospital. I have a houseful of guests and haven’t had much free time, what with one thing and another.”

“It is not expected that you would come see someone like me, Marco,” he said.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Sal. Dani and I have grown quite fond of you over the years. And why wouldn’t I come to see you? After all, you are a descendant of il Duca just like me.”

“Marco, there’s a big difference between being a remote descendant of il Duca and being his son.”

“Sal,” I said, “I know for a fact that Father keeps track of all his descendants.”

“He does?”

“Absolutely. He even has a computer program that helps him do it. Besides, I grew up in America, and we don’t take all that class stuff quite so seriously.”

“Perhaps, but now that you are here, you should. I can’t imagine your father coming to visit a bodyguard who failed at his job, no matter what the relationship.”

“Sal, you’re family, and when it comes to family, Father takes care of



his own, and that includes descendants such as yourself, no matter how remote. And stop with that ‘failed at his job’ shit—as I, and everyone else, for that matter, see it, you saved our lives that day.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Now, back to basics. How are you?”

“Getting better. How is Danilo?” he said.

“We brought him home this morning. One kidney isn’t functioning, and the other kidney is failing. He’s going to need a transplant as soon as a suitable donor turns up.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

“On the bright side, the seriousness of his injuries has served to reunite him with at least part of his family.”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

I spelled it out for him.

“Families are something else, aren’t they?” he said.

“Yeah.”

We spent a few minutes talking before I said, “I need to get back up the mountain and check on Dani. Is there anything I can do for you, Sal?”

“Can you get me out of here?”

“Aren’t you enjoying the time off?” I said.

“It’s my girlfriend. She’s spent a lot of time fussing over me and taking care of me.”

“And that’s not a good thing, because...?”

“It is a good thing in small doses, but she wants to move in, and that will certainly lead to something much more permanent,” he said.

“I understand. Okay, here’s what we’ll do. As soon as you can persuade your doctor to sign off on allowing you to return to light duty, let me know. I’ll see to it that there is an urgent need for you somewhere, even if it’s a desk job, okay?”

“You’re a lifesaver, Marco.”

“That makes us even then, doesn’t it?” I said.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

He walked to the door with me and, surprising us both, hugged me before he opened it. "Thank you again," he said.

"My pleasure, Sal."

On the way up the mountain in the car, I called Modesto and explained Sal's predicament. "Are there desk jobs he could do with one arm in a sling for a while?" I said.

"Several," Modesto said.

"Good. As soon as he's cleared for light duty, why don't you put him to work?"

"Count on it, Marco."

"Thanks."

When I got home, the ladies were in the boys' room. Mrs. Rosati was sitting on the floor with the boys, and her mother was perched on a footstool nearby.

"Where's Dani?" I said.

"Last time I looked in on him," Mrs. Rosati said, "he was asleep in one of the chaise lounges on the terrace outside the master bedroom."

"I'm not surprised—that's one of his favorite spots."

The boys were clamoring for my attention, so I sat down on the floor for a few minutes and joined them. "I'll play with you for a bit, guys," I said, "then I have to go check up on Papa Dani. I might even take a nap."

I played with them until I began to yawn; then I got up and went to the master bedroom. I walked out onto the terrace and saw that Dani was sleeping peacefully, so I settled down on another of the lounge chairs and closed my eyes.

CHAPTER 28

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*Dani*

I WOKE up from my nap and saw Marco sprawled sound asleep on the other chaise lounge, so I quietly went inside and used the bathroom. When I came back into the bedroom, I saw something I had missed on my trip to the bathroom—there was an envelope lying on the floor just inside the bedroom door, which was closed. I picked up the envelope and saw that it had “Marco and Dani” written on it, so I broke the seal and read the short handwritten note inside.

*Hi, guys. We came up to say hello, and found both of you out cold on the terrace. We’re taking the ladies from Boston into the city to go shopping in the old quarter, and Lucia has been asked not to disturb you unless the house is on fire. It is now four o’clock, and we will be gone for at least two, probably three, hours. Use the time wisely. William and Henry.*

I locked the bedroom door and went out onto the terrace, where I straddled Marco’s body on the lounge. This of course woke him up.

“What’s up?” he said.

“We’ve been given a present.”

“Of what?”

“This was inside the bedroom door when I woke up.”

I handed him the envelope and the note, which he read and said, “Wow!”

“That note was written fifteen minutes ago, and I’ve locked the bedroom door...” I said.

“Then I think maybe we’d better go see if the bed still works.”

Sometime later, I said, “Can we go to the bathroom and round up the

shaving cream and a razor? I'm in desperate need of body grooming, and you could use a touch-up."

"You talked me into it, babe."

The first time Marco and I had used the baths, one of us (Marco, I think) had commented on the general absence of body hair among the patrons. His father, who was with us at the time, had explained that the Romans despised body hair, and the baths were Roman baths in every sense of the word. Trevor, who was also with us on that occasion, hinted that couples who shaved each other tended to find the process extremely erotic, and a day or so later we discovered that he was one hundred percent correct. Which explained the fact that by the time we were both totally smooth, we were also totally aroused. This caused us to adjourn once again to the bedroom and, needless to say, the bed. We eventually wound up in the shower again, and Marco had just finished drying my back and replacing the dressings on my incisions when he heard his cell phone ringing.

"I'd better go answer it," he said.

"No argument."

When he returned to the bathroom, he was grinning. "Tell me," I said.

"William and Henry are taking the ladies to Poco for dinner in a little while, and I've accepted an invitation for us to join them."

"Works for me. I guess we'd better get dressed."

"You start, I'm gonna call for a driver first," he said.

When he called for a car, Marco asked a question that had been on my mind for a while. "Hi, Modesto, Marco here. ... Sorry to bother you, but Dani and I have a question. ... Are we ever going to be able to relax our guard enough to drive ourselves around again, or take the tram to work from the castle? ... Yeah, I guess that makes sense. ... Well, keep me posted. By the way, we need a car and driver to take us to Poco to have dinner with our guests. ... Thanks, bye."

"Well?" I said.

"Signor Piedmont Winery is singing like the proverbial canary, and he has implicated a small crime family in the Piedmont region."

"Which has what to do with relaxing our guard?" I said.

"It seems that our bad guy had promised them access to some of the money he has squirreled away in exchange for my demise. They failed to deliver, so he didn't give them access."

“Stop dragging this out and cut to the chase.”

“We’re going to grab the money, which should remove any motive for further attacks, especially with him under lock and key.”

“What about revenge for having grabbed the money?” I said.

“They won’t have time to worry about that, babe,” he said.

“Why?”

“As it happens, there’s a rival crime family in the Piedmont region, and we’re working on starting some conflict between the two groups.”

“However would we do that?” I said.

“We will insert a couple of *agents provocateurs* in their midst to spread a few rumors. It may take a while, but Modesto believes that the two groups will ultimately wipe each other out. In any case, they’re going to be too busy to worry about us, so we’ll be able eventually to relax a bit—not totally, but quite a bit.”

“Something to look forward to, right?”

“You bet. But I wouldn’t go spreading that tidbit of information around just yet, okay?”

“Mum’s the word. What are they gonna do with the money?” I said.

“That depends on how much money there is. The pilot and co-pilot of the Learjet that crashed had several children between them, all of whom are minors. Trust funds were set up for them at the time of the crash, and a great deal of this money will be used to supplement those trusts. After that, I don’t know.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Yeah.”

Renato picked us up at the house, drove us to the restaurant, and went to park the car. When we stepped inside the restaurant, we found a large table in front already occupied by our party, and we settled down to enjoy a meal in our favorite eatery. I spotted William and Henry’s driver at a table in the corner, and a few minutes later I saw Renato join him. We had a great time over dinner, and Mom and Grandma were very impressed with the dinner menu, saying that it was even better than the lunch menu.

“I don’t see very many bags on the floor beside you, Mom,” I said.  
“Was the shopping okay?”

“The trunk of the car is full of stuff,” Grandma said.

“That’s true,” Mom said, “what you see here is literally the tip of the iceberg.”

“She’s going to have to buy an extra suitcase to get all of it home,” Grandma said.

“I guess that means you had a good time,” Marco said.

“You bet,” Grandma said.

When everyone had finished their dessert, Marco asked for the check. “Don’t even think about it,” William said, “it’s our treat.”

“Yeah,” Henry said, “we wanted to do something special on our last night here.”

“That’s right,” Marco said, “you’re flying to Geneva in the morning, and from there elsewhere in Europe, right?”

“Absolutely,” Henry said. “We’re spending a couple of days each in Amsterdam and Brussels, then we’re taking the Chunnel train to London, where we have a couple of business-related meetings.”

“And from there,” William said, “it’s home to Boston.”

“Nothing like turning a vacation trip into a business expense,” Marco said.

“We’re pretty careful to follow the rules,” Henry said, “so only the two days in London will qualify as business, but I take your point.”

While we waited for the drivers to retrieve the cars, we all said goodbye to the Lanes, knowing that we wouldn’t see them before they left in the morning.

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CHAPTER 29

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*Marco*

WE SAID goodbye to the Lanes, and Dani and I got into the car with Renato at the wheel. The other car, carrying the cousins and Dani's family, would drop William and Henry off at the castle before heading up the mountain, which is why we got home first, and I was able to get Dani comfortably ensconced in our bed before his mother and grandmother got there. I was sitting in the living room, nursing a glass of port, when they arrived.

"Where's Dani?" his mother said.

"Upstairs in bed, but he's awake and waiting to say good night," I said.

"Are you coming up?"

"I need to spend some time on the computer before I call it a night. Can I offer you anything?"

"After all that food and wine, I don't think so. What about you, Mother?"

"Are you kidding?" Mrs. Piccioni said. "All I want is a bed."

"Then I'll see you folks in the morning."

I went to the den, checked my e-mail, and sent a couple of messages. Then I secured the house and went upstairs to the master bedroom. Dani was already out cold, so I stripped and crawled into bed with him.

Monday morning, everyone was in a good mood, and the day passed without incident. First thing Tuesday morning Dani had his second dialysis session, and his mother and grandmother sat with him while I went to my office and told my receptionist to start accepting appointments. It was time for me to get back on some sort of a work schedule. Starting Wednesday, I went to the hospital every day and left Dani and our guests to their own devices.

They went with him to his dialysis sessions Thursday, and Saturday, and Sunday morning, we accompanied them to the airport to say goodbye.

"You're welcome to come back anytime," I said. "Just let us know."

"Thanks," Mrs. Rosati said. "Your grandmother invited us to come and visit her at her villa in Tuscany as well."

"Then you should take her up on it," Dani said. "It's a beautiful place, and I'm sure she'd enjoy the company."

"Mother and I both have husbands to look after," Mrs. Rosati said. "We just can't go flying all over the world when we want to."

"Why not?" I said. "They're retired, after all. Bring them with you next time."

"Believe me," she said, "we'll definitely work toward that goal."

The plane departed, and Dani and I returned home. "Alone at last," he said when we were on the terrace outside our bedroom door.

"And isn't it wonderful?" I said.

"Babe, you just said a mouthful."

Dani started working half days that week, went to a normal schedule the following week, and life more or less returned to normal—the only abnormality being Dani's thrice-weekly dialysis sessions. He began to carry on a weekly exchange of e-mails with his mother and got an occasional letter from his grandmother. I managed to persuade him to stay at home the next time I went down to Conti for a weekend, which set a pattern for subsequent trips. When his absence was remarked upon, his Saturday-morning dialysis sessions became the accepted excuse. In the past we had always moved back to the castle when school began in September to make it easier for Lucia to attend classes. This year, however, we were so thoroughly settled into our comfortable routine that we provided her with a car, which she happily drove to the university as needed. The young woman who took her place when she was either off duty or at the university didn't seem to mind driving to work instead of taking a tram to the castle. We finally moved back to il Castello on a Sunday afternoon a few days in advance of the first snow.

"I miss the waterfall already," Dani said over coffee the next morning.

"Yeah, me too."

"Anything special happening this week?" he said.

"Not really, except that I have to go down to Conti Saturday morning."



“Can I go with you this time?”

“What about your dialysis?” I said.

“I asked the nephrologist about that, and he thinks I can switch to a Monday, Wednesday, and Friday schedule without any problem.”

“Shall we ask Gert to go with us to help with the boys?” I said.

“Yeah, your loyal subjects haven’t seen them in a while, so that would be good.”

“I’ll give her a call when I get to work.”

Shortly before we boarded the plane Saturday morning to fly down to Conti, one of the security people entered the hangar and walked over to where we were standing. “Modesto asked me to give you this, Conte Marco,” he said, handing me a sealed manila envelope.

“Please thank him for me. I’ll take a look at it during the flight.”

He nodded and left, and we climbed up the steps to settle down in the cabin. When we had reached our cruising altitude I opened the envelope and found that it contained only a section from a newspaper. Reading the headlines on the first page, I said, “Well, that didn’t take long.”

“What didn’t take long?” Dani said.

“Two ticks.” I perused the article, then handed him the newspaper.

“Wow,” he said when he saw the headline.

“Give it to Gert when you’re finished.”

He finished reading the article and handed the paper to Gert, who glanced at it and said, “This headline says, ‘Twelve dead in gang warfare,’” she said. “What’s so significant about that?”

“One of the gangs was responsible for the attack on us,” I said.

“Really?” she said.

“Yes. The bad guy promised them some of the money he had embezzled from the Conti Group in exchange for getting rid of me. If you remember the story, we learned that he had ties to crime.”

“What did you mean when you said something about it not taking long?”

“Father’s investigators learned that the gang in question had rivals, and they managed to spread just enough rumors and disinformation to start a fight between the gangs.”

“No shit!” she said. “Wait a minute, wasn’t he worried that innocent bystanders might get killed?”

“The risk was minimal. These gangs are pretty careful to only go after active members of other gangs. When they kill civilians in the process, it generates too much attention.”

“Are you telling me that the police look the other way?” she said.

“They don’t exactly do that, but on the other hand, when bad guys kill other bad guys, it doesn’t rate a very high priority.”

We landed in Conti and were met at the airport as usual by Giuseppe. “Luciano usually meets us,” I said. “Where is he?”

Surprising me, he motioned me to follow him. When we had stepped out of earshot from Gert and Dani, he said, “He’s in his office, Marco, and he wants most urgently to see you.”

“Do you know what he wants?”

“Yes, I do, but it is something that should be discussed in extreme privacy,” he said, motioning toward the people handling the plane.

“Okay, let’s get to the castle.”

When I boarded the SUV, Dani looked at me curiously. “What was that about?” he said.

“All I know is that Luciano has urgent need of me and is waiting in his office.”

Our usual babysitter was waiting for the SUV at the castle entrance, and with her help, we herded the boys up to our apartment. “I’m gonna go see what Luciano wants,” I said once the rug rats were settled in their room.

“You go ahead,” Dani said. “I’m going to lie down for a bit.”

“I knew you should have stayed home and gone for your dialysis.”

“Don’t start. I’m okay, just a little tired.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Gert said.

“Thanks.”

I left the apartment and hurried over to the office wing of the building. Luciano was at his desk, obviously waiting for me, and surprisingly, Giuseppe was there as well. “Marco,” Luciano said. He got up, walked around the desk, and greeted me European-style with a hug followed by an air-kiss on each cheek. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“What’s up?” I said.

“This,” he said, handing me a newspaper.

The headline story was the same, but the newspaper was from a different city. “One of Father’s security people handed me a different paper containing this same story as I boarded the plane,” I said. “So?”

“There’s been a reporter here in Conti for a couple of days asking questions,” he said.

“Again, so?”

“Marco, it’s not that he’s asking questions, it’s the way he’s asking them and who he’s asking.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“The article mentions the one gang’s connection to Signor Piedmont Winery, and he’s been asking about that. Rather than come here to the home office of the Conti Group and talk to me, he’s been talking to employees and servants. By all accounts, he phrases his questions in such a way that they hint at something sinister.”

“That’s not good,” I said.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Who is he and do we know anything about him?”

“He’s from one of the tabloids in Rome, and he has a reputation for exposing and exaggerating all manner of things and making them look as sensational as possible.”

“What else do we know about him and/or his plans?” I said.

“Well, there is one thing....”

“And that is?”

“Giuseppe,” Luciano said, “this is where you come in.”

“Giuseppe?” I said, turning to look in his direction.

“Signor Neri asked me to check him out yesterday,” Giuseppe said, “so I sort of took a peek in his hotel room late last night.”

“Good for you,” I said, “and however did you manage that?”

“I was in the bar at his hotel and he was interviewing me, so I managed to get him drunk. It wasn’t difficult—the man drinks like a fish, as long as someone else pays for it. I slipped into his room around three in the morning,

and he was out cold. You could hear the snoring from down the hallway.”

“Did you find anything of interest?” I said.

“I found a train ticket to Aragoni, but all of his notes appeared to be in his laptop.”

“Too bad you didn’t get a look at them.”

“I did better than that—it wasn’t password protected.” He handed me a flash drive. “And I left a very powerful key-logging program on his machine.”

“Well done, Giuseppe. I presume the train ticket indicated what day he’ll be traveling.”

“It was for the train that arrives in Aragoni early Monday morning.”

“Do we have a picture of this guy, or a good physical description?” I said.

“There are several photos of him on the flash drive, and Signor Neri has my full report, including a color printout of one of the photos.”

Luciano handed me the photo. “He looks like a weasel,” I said. “I guess that’s appropriate, given his occupation.”

“That he does,” Luciano said.

“This is fantastic, Giuseppe. I could kiss you.”

“I’ll settle for dinner at Signor Burato’s hotel this evening, Conte Marco.”

“You’re on.”

“What will you do, Marco?” Luciano said.

“Arrange a little reception committee for this guy in Aragoni.”

“Reception committee?” he parroted.

“Security people will grab him the minute he steps off the train, take him somewhere, and have a long conversation with him.”

“Is that wise? He’ll make a huge fuss when he’s free.”

“He will remember only having a pleasant conversation about things to do and see while in Aragoni, and when he leaves the country he will have lost interest in any sinister aspects to the story.”

“How....”

“A combination of drugs and hypnosis can accomplish miracles,” I said.

"I'm impressed," Luciano said, "but isn't that a bit extreme?"

"It's an extreme situation—let me tell you about that gang war," I said, and I told them how the war had been instigated.

"I see what you mean," Luciano said, "and I have to admit that it was a clever solution to a situation that could have dragged on through the courts for years—even if the police were totally above corruption."

"My father thought it was the simplest way to ensure greater security for Dani and me, and I certainly couldn't argue with him."

"Remind me never to get on il Duca's bad side," he said.

"What will happen to Signor Piedmont Winery?" Giuseppe said.

"For one thing, he won't be extradited to Italy. There will be a trial, and ultimately an execution—don't forget the pilot and co-pilot of the jet who died in that crash."

"Good."

"How is Dani doing?" Luciano said.

"He undergoes dialysis three times a week, and is doing fairly well. His one functioning kidney hasn't entirely shut down, and that helps, but the sooner a transplant donor is found, the better."

"And Sal?" Giuseppe said.

"He begged to be allowed to return to work and is working a desk job while his shoulder mends. It will take a few more weeks of physical therapy before he's fully functional again."

"You're all very lucky to be alive," Luciano said.

"Absolutely," I said.

Giuseppe left the office, and Luciano and I spent our usual hour or three going over the affairs of the Conti Group. "The wine distributing business is doing very well, isn't it?" I said.

"The numbers speak for themselves, and yes, it is. Your cousin Stefano was here last week with Signora Jammalo, and she and I had a very productive meeting. Did you know they're seeing each other?"

"No, I didn't, but good for them. I run into Stefano frequently, but he, like most of my relatives, is a very private person and doesn't talk about his dating habits. Is it serious?"

"I believe so," he said.

“Fantastic. How’s your love life, by the way?”

“Well, I’m still seeing Izzy, if that’s what you’re asking. He’s a lot of fun to be with, but it’s hardly the romance of the century.”

“Can you join us for dinner this evening?” I said.

“Actually, I’m booked on a train to Milan in a couple of hours.”

“What can I say, except enjoy what’s left of your weekend.”

“Thank you, Marco. I intend to do just that.”

I got back to my quarters just in time to participate in the boys’ lunch and then to eat my own. “Are we going to walk around the square after the boys have a nap?” Dani said.

“I don’t think you need to be doing that much walking,” I said. “We’ll just go to an outdoor café and have a drink. If any of the citizens want to pay their respects, they can come to us this time.”

“Works for me.”

“We also need to keep an eye out for this guy.” I showed them the picture.

“He looks like a weasel,” Gert said.

“Yeah,” Dani said. “Who is he?”

“He’s a reporter for one of the tabloids in Rome, and he’s been snooping around town asking questions. He seems to be interested in that gang battle over in the Piedmont region.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

I related what Luciano had told me, leaving out Giuseppe’s middle of the night visit to the man’s room, as well as his discovery of the guy’s planned visit to Aragoni.

“Maybe you should call that nice Carabinieri Captain—you remember, the guy who replaced the one your uncle had in his pocket,” Dani said.

“Yeah, he’s made several courtesy calls at the castle when we’ve been here, and he did tell me to call him any time I needed him.”

“There you go. Do you still have his card?”

“It’s in the desk right there in the den,” I said. “Which reminds me, I need to get online and send some stuff to Aragoni about this reporter.”

“Go ahead,” he said. “Gert and I will help with the boys.”

I went into the den, set my laptop on the desk, and connected to the Internet. Then I composed a lengthy message to Modesto, in his capacity as chief of security, and sent a copy to Father. It took some doing, but I also managed to zip up the files on the flash drive and send them along as well. I didn't have to rummage around in the desk for the Carabinieri Captain's number because I had entered it in my address book at one point. When I returned to the sitting room and joined Gert and Dani, I was smiling.

"Something has you amused," Dani said.

"Yeah. I called the Captain to tell him about the nosy reporter, and to my surprise, he was well aware of the guy's presence—and activities—in town."

"Good for him."

"Yeah. Anyway, when we go to that outdoor café, there'll be one or two guys in uniform hanging around, just in case." I looked at Gert. "Sorry this isn't turning into a fun weekend, Gert."

"Don't sweat it," she said, "an outing is an outing. If I had stayed home this weekend, I wouldn't be doing anything exciting."

"Whatever happened to the gentleman at the wine shop?" I said.

"He's still around, but he doesn't trust his help to run the shop on Saturdays, so it's hard to convince him to even go for a drive."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

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CHAPTER 30

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*Dani*

AFTER the boys woke up from their nap, Marco, Gert, and I took them down to the castle entrance, where Giuseppe was waiting with a car. When we reached the town square, he found a prime parking spot almost immediately—one that was less than a block from the café. We walked down to the café and selected an outdoor table shaded by a large umbrella. Two young men wearing Carabinieri uniforms who were standing across the street came over and stationed themselves at the edge of the seating area a few minutes after we were settled. By the time our orders had been delivered, word had spread, and various people began to stop by to speak to il Conte. Marco found this extremely annoying but knew that it was expected of him, so he played the gracious Lord of the Manor, smiled dutifully, shook the proffered hands, and made small talk. We had been sitting at our table less than fifteen minutes when I spotted “the weasel” walking purposefully down the street toward us.

“Don’t look now,” I said, “but here he comes.”

“Who?” Marco said.

“‘Weasel face’, who else?”

Giuseppe was sitting at a nearby table with his back to the building so he could scan the entire street, and I saw his posture stiffen ever so slightly when he spotted the reporter. Marco was facing away from the approaching reporter and continued to devote his attention to the woman he was talking with. I watched as the guy retrieved a small camera from his pocket and slowly circled around the table, obviously taking pictures. He finally walked up to our table and pushed his way to a point beside the woman who was talking to Marco.

“Excuse me,” he said, “I would like to ask you some questions.”



Marco looked up at him and said rather coolly, "Then I suggest you go up to il Castello and make an appointment. Please do not interrupt my conversation with this lovely lady again." He turned to the woman and picked up their conversation from the point at which it had been interrupted.

The man was determined to get a reaction from Marco and, once again, tried to brush the woman aside. Marco raised his arm, pointed at the guy, and looked pointedly at the two policemen, who appeared beside our table immediately.

"Signore," one of them said, "Il Conte does not wish to be disturbed by reporters, and you must leave."

The man became indignantly vocal, so one of the policemen took him by the arm and led him away. Before they got too far, the man broke free from the policeman's hand and trotted back toward our table. He made the mistake of coming too close to Giuseppe's table in the process, and Giuseppe quickly stuck a foot out—over which Signor Weasel Face tripped and went sprawling. Giuseppe was on his feet in a flash and pounced on the man's camera, which had landed some distance away. He turned his back to us for a minute, doing something with his hands, then came back and handed the camera to the reporter, who was now on his feet.

"I believe you dropped this, Signore," Giuseppe said.

Then both of the policemen took the guy's hands and led him down the street. Giuseppe turned in my direction, grinning, and showed me what he had in his hand—it was the memory card from the reporter's camera. I gave him a thumbs-up, and he returned to his seat. We stayed at the café a bit longer until, as usual, the boys started getting restless; then we herded them back to the car, and Giuseppe drove us up the hill.

"That was clever of you, Giuseppe," I said. "Fast-thinking and clever."

"What are you talking about?" Marco said.

"Your back was to all the action," I said. "When the cop marched him away the first time, the guy broke loose and tried to hurry back to where we were sitting. Giuseppe stuck his foot out and tripped the guy, which sent him sprawling. He retrieved the guy's camera and returned it to him *sans* memory card."

"I think you just earned an extra helping of dessert this evening, Giuseppe," Marco said, "perhaps even a bottle of your favorite wine."

"Be sure to call your buddy the Captain," I said, "and tell him his boys in blue did good."

“Count on it. Giuseppe, is that guy staying in Signor Burato’s hotel?”

“No, Sir. He’s at the hotel on the other side of the town square.”

“Good. I’m really looking forward to having some of the wonderful food at his hotel this evening, and I’d hate to have to pass it up because of an annoying and persistent guest.”

Once the boys were bedded down that evening, Giuseppe drove us to the hotel for dinner, and Marco invited him to join us as usual. Evidently, word of the attack in Aragoni had become common knowledge in Conti, and Signor Burato was especially solicitous when he inquired about our injuries. “I was lucky,” Marco said, “and only received a few cuts and bruises. The bomb landed under the car and just behind Dani’s seat, so he bore the brunt of the attack. What do you have tonight that is particularly good?”

Marco’s verbal diversion to the subject of food succeeded, and Signor Burato began to explain the nightly specials. Later, after we had consumed an amazing meal and were eating our dessert, Marco signaled to him.

When he arrived at our table, Marco asked, “Are you acquainted with Captain Scorsese of the Carabinieri, Signor Burato?”

“Of course, Signor Conte, he comes into the wine shop quite often.”

“Then you probably know what his favorite wines are?”

“Absolutely.”

Marco handed him an envelope and said, “Please be good enough to have a bottle of his favorite wine delivered to him along with this envelope.”

“It will be done Monday morning,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“What was in that envelope?” I asked when Signor Burato was out of earshot.

“A note thanking him for his assistance today and asking that he share the bottle with the two policemen involved.”

“That was clever of you,” Gert said. “You rewarded him without turning it into a bribe.”

“That was the general idea.”

When Signor Burato brought us our after-dinner drinks, Marco said, “Signor Burato, the next time Giuseppe comes here for dinner with a beautiful woman, please be so good as to send me the bill. We had a small incident this

afternoon with an unpleasant reporter, and Giuseppe was very clever in dealing with it.”

“It will be my pleasure, Signor Conte, but what if the woman is not so beautiful?”

“Our Giuseppe deserves only the best, so I’ll let you be the judge of that.”

“To tell the truth, he comes here often and is seldom alone—I cannot recall ever having seen him with an unattractive companion.”

“There you go,” Marco said.

“Thank you, Conte Marco,” Giuseppe said.

“It’s no less than you deserve, Giuseppe. Thanks to your quick thinking, our pictures will not be all over the tabloids in the near future.”

We retired to the castle for the night in a very good mood, slept the sleep of the just, and were in the air and on our way home by nine o’clock the next morning.

## CHAPTER 31

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### *Marco*

WHEN we arrived at the airport in Aragoni, Gert helped us get the boys settled down in the car, and I instructed the driver to stop by her place on the way to the castle.

“Are you sure you don’t need some help when you get to the castle?” Gert said.

“Thanks, Gert, but we’ll manage. I think Dani and I as a team are still more than a match for three little boys.”

“You won’t be saying that a few years from now,” she said.

“True, and we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Yeah,” Dani said, “meanwhile, thanks for all your help, Gert. We really appreciate it.”

“Will work for food and travel,” she said, and she laughed at her own humor.

When we got to our apartment, Dani and I took the boys to their room and spent some quality time with them. In fact, we didn’t budge from the floor of their bedroom until it was time to fix lunch. Later, when they were taking a nap, we had some quality time of our own. The minute I sat down at my desk Monday morning, I telephoned Modesto.

“How did it go with the reporter?” I said.

“We had a nice little chat with him. It turns out that he was really looking for some sort of sinister connection between Conti and that gun battle in the Piedmont region.”

“Then why did he come to Aragoni?” I said.

“Because he smelled a story. He was unable to articulate a precise

reason why, only that he thought there was something odd going on.”

“That’s not good,” I said.

“No, it’s not, and I’m very glad that our people in Conti made you aware of the man’s presence.”

When I inherited the title of Conte de Conti, the Aragoni Group had begun to provide security services in Conti, for which the Conti Group were billed on a monthly basis.

“Yeah, Giuseppe is pretty sharp—and he has been suitably rewarded for it.”

“He is that. In fact, I had considered bringing him here during the time that Sal was laid up, but I decided to leave him in place.”

“I’m very glad you did. By the way, have we learned anything from the key-logging program Giuseppe inserted in the guy’s laptop?”

“Hardly,” he said, “given that we just interviewed him an hour or so ago. That being said, there’s no doubt in my mind that he is no longer interested in Conti, Aragoni, or yourself.”

“What will happen with the program?” I said.

“It will self-destruct in sixty days—assuming it isn’t discovered.”

“And if it is discovered?”

“It contains absolutely nothing that can be traced to us.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” I said.

“In any case, the reporter has been dealt with. Unfortunately, this isn’t the first time we’ve had to deal with people nosing around the Duchy.”

“So I’m told, and I’m sorry that my association with Conti has brought more of it down on us.”

“Marco, there’s no reason to be sorry for things that are totally outside of your control.”

“Yeah, I guess. By the way, my cousin Luciano in Conti tells me that Stefano has a romance going with the lady from Calabria. To which all I can say is ‘way to go, Stefano’.”

“He does seem quite smitten, and I agree with your sentiment. He has been alone for a very long time.”

“I understand. Father made it quite clear early on that I would have to face up to loneliness in the future. I’ll let you go now, because my first

appointment of the day will be here any minute.”

Dani and I quickly got back into our regular routines. With his dialysis schedule changed to Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, we managed to spend a weekend in Siena a couple of weeks after our return from Conti. It was getting close to Christmas, and we were looking forward to it—as were three little boys who, at three and a half, were very much aware of what Christmas might bring. We had even extended an invitation through Dani’s mother asking his siblings to come to Aragoni in January for the ski season, but they never responded.

Angelina came to see me in late October in my official capacity as a doctor, and I referred her to a gynecologist. She had somehow talked Father into agreeing that she could take fertility drugs, and I did some extensive research into those that were available. Her gynecologist and I jointly selected one of the safest, and Angelina started the treatments. One of the things that fertility drugs did was induce ovulation, and I was really curious to see if it would even work on a woman whose reproductive cycle was programmed by her genes to happen for only six consecutive months every five years. I was surprised to see her name on my list of appointments one day in early December and even more surprised when Father came to the appointment with her.

Without preamble, I said, “What can I do for you today, Angelina?”

“You can tell me who does the intrauterine insemination,” she said.

“Does that mean what I think it does?” I said. *Way to go, dummy*, I thought. *You know very well what it means.*

“It does indeed. I actually had a period two weeks ago, and there’s no reason why I won’t have another one in a couple of weeks.”

“Very good,” I said. “I’ll give you a referral to the doctor who does that procedure.”

“Absolutely,” she said, “and I can’t thank you enough.”

“Thank me?” I parroted. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did,” she said. “Before I married your father, you convinced me that I could have children despite my irregular cycles.”

I looked at Father.

“Do not look at me,” he said. “I have visited the fertility clinic and made several donations—my part in this is over, at least for the moment.”

“All right, then. I’ll make the necessary contacts.”

“Thank you, Marco,” she said.

“Father, if this is successful, you need to start giving some serious consideration to Malcolm’s pet proposal.”

“You mean about adding a medical school to the university and establishing this hospital as a teaching hospital?”

“Exactly. I wish there were some way to encourage more family members to go into medicine—we don’t need any gossip to get out about what we’re doing here.”

“That is true,” he said, “and I have been working on just that problem. Special scholarships have been offered to a number of young people in our various enclaves, and some of them are beginning to take advantage of the program. I think it is safe to say that we will have our own supply of doctors in a few years.”

“That’s wonderful, because the implications for the future of our family and Angelina’s family are enormous. In the meantime, if you’re willing to underwrite it, perhaps Malcolm could persuade another one of our doctors to go somewhere and become certified in the IUI procedures.”

“Tell him to do it,” he said, “and the Council will underwrite the cost.”

“Count on it.”

“How’s Dani?” Angelina said. “I mean, how’s he really doing, as opposed to what he says?”

“Not that badly, all things considered. He doesn’t really have the energy or stamina that he had before the attack, but compared to other people who’ve been on dialysis for six months, he’s doing okay. We keep hoping that a donor will be found sooner rather than later, but there’s no way to speed up the process.”

“What about his siblings?” Father said.

“His mother hinted that they might volunteer, and we even put her in touch with the right people in Boston, but none of them showed any interest at all.”

“You have other patients waiting,” Father said, “so we will be going.”

“Thank you, Marco,” Angelina said, “thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“You’re welcome.”

They left, and the next patient was sent in to see me.

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CHAPTER 32

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*Dani*

MARCO and I were really looking forward to Christmas this year, for the simple reason that the boys were well aware of what was going to happen, and they were more than ready for the experience. As usual, the merchants in the old quarter of Aragoni outdid themselves with their displays of Christmas lights and decorations, and we made several early evening trips with the boys to admire the lighting. About three weeks before Christmas, we acquired a huge tree that almost touched the ceiling of the living room, and the boys watched us decorate it. They begged to be allowed to help, so we finally let them place ornaments on those lower branches that were within their reach, and they had a ball doing so. We had planned to visit Marco's grandmother a few days before Christmas, but a week of extremely bad weather prevented us from flying down to Siena. Luciano and Izzy spent a weekend with us in December, and we enjoyed their company as always. The Thursday after Luciano and Izzy left, Marco came to my office an hour earlier than we normally left to go home.

"You're a bit early," I said.

"We have to be somewhere."

"Where?"

"Come on, I'll tell you on the way."

"Two ticks."

I shut everything down and left the inner lab, closing the door firmly and testing it to make certain that it had automatically locked—it never failed to do so, but I always double-checked. I had to hurry to catch up with Marco, who was already halfway to the elevators.

"What's the rush?" I said while he waited for the elevator.



“We have to be somewhere.”

“You said that.”

“I know.”

“God, I hate it when you start being all mysterious,” I said.

“No you don’t, you like surprises.”

“Well....”

“Patience....”

I followed him down to the hospital entrance, where Sal was waiting with a car. “We’re not taking the tram home?” I said.

“Obviously.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

Sal drove us quickly out of town, but it took me a few minutes to realize that we were heading in the general direction of the airport. “Okay, so we’re going to the airport. Why?”

“Good-looking and smart. How lucky can a man be?”

Rather than egg him on, I shut up and bided my time. When the car pulled up in front of the arrivals entrance to the Aragoni International Airport, I was really surprised and started to say something, but Marco put a finger to my lips.

“Patience, and all will be revealed.”

I got out of the car with him and followed him to the baggage area, where, much to my surprise, Joel and Claire Anderson were waiting for us. Joel Anderson was a foot taller than our five feet six inches and was literally an ebony giant. He and Marco had become best friends when they were roommates at boarding school, and the friendship had continued through the years.

“Hello, Runt,” Joel said when he saw Marco. As he had done when he met us in Rome on our first trip to Italy, he picked Marco up bodily and kissed him wetly on the forehead.

“Boys will be boys,” Claire said, shaking her head.

“Yeah,” I said, “we played out this little scene in Rome when we first flew to Italy.”

“Joel told me you said you’d kick him in the balls if he tried to pick you up and kiss you.”

“God, I’ll never live that down, will I? It’s so good to see you guys—Marco didn’t tell me you were coming.”

We spent a couple of minutes talking, and then their bags appeared, so we went to where Sal was waiting with the car. When we were underway, I couldn’t hold back my curiosity any longer. “Joel,” I said, “I thought you were in South Africa.”

“I was, for four long years, but now I’m on my way to Paris.”

“I love Paris,” Claire said, “but Joel doesn’t.”

“Honey,” Joel said, “Paris is a great place, except for one thing.”

“Don’t tell me,” Marco said, “let me guess—it’s full of the French, right?”

“Damn straight,” Joel said. “I can’t stand the bastards. We saved their collective butts twice in the twentieth century, and do they show any gratitude? Not a bit. Because of the ungrateful attitude of the French, I’ve stopped drinking French wine—hell of a thing to let your beliefs interfere with your drinking habits, but I’m serious about this.”

“That’s kind of a prestigious posting, isn’t it?” I asked in an effort to change the subject.

“Yeah,” he said, “I guess they decided they needed a token colored boy in the embassy to make the French feel better about the barbaric Americans.”

“Anyhow,” Claire continued for her husband, “Marco has kept us informed concerning all things medical and invited us to spend a long weekend with you before we move into our new digs in Paris.”

“And we’re really glad to see you,” I said.

“Next time you come to Paris to go to the opera, you can stay with us,” she said.

“We’ll take you up on that,” Marco said. “Count on it.”

“Joel can’t wait to visit the baths and have a massage,” Claire said, giggling.

“Honey,” Joel said, “don’t start.”

“Sorry,” she said. Then she looked at me and winked.

We had a wonderful time visiting with them over the weekend, and

Marco and I were both extremely sorry to see them leave. As we watched their plane take off from the International Airport, I thought of something. “Marco,” I said, “I never got around to asking you why a great couple like Joel and Claire don’t have children.”

“Babe,” he said, “they’d like to do just that, but she has a medical problem. And because they’re subject to being sent all over the world, they haven’t tried to adopt.”

“Wow. I’m certainly glad I didn’t ask them that question.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a sore spot with them. That being said, Joel took me aside recently and asked a lot of pointed questions about surrogate mothers.”

“And?” I said.

“Eventually, I think he’ll be contacting William and Henry.”

“Good for him.”

Christmas Eve arrived, and we finally got three excited toddlers bedded down for the night, after which Lucia went to a Christmas party with some of her friends from the university. Before we retired for the night, we had fun playing Santa Claus. Marco somehow managed to wake up before the boys on Christmas morning, and he made sure that I was also awake. In fact, we pulled on comfortable warm-up suits and settled down in the living room with our coffee while we waited for the boys to wake up. Shortly after six, they came tumbling out of their room and headed for the tree, and soon after that, we totally lost control of the day. Every time we got the boys settled down, someone else chose that exact moment to pay us a visit. The babysitter showed up (we were paying her through the nose for a three-hour gig on Christmas Day), and Marco and I went to the Ducal residence for Christmas dinner. Angelina opened the door to greet us, and she was literally bubbling over with happiness. The word ebullient came immediately to mind.

“Come on in,” she said, “everyone’s in the library.”

“Everyone?” Marco parroted.

“You’ll see. Come, come.”

We headed in the direction of the library, and Angelina closed the door and followed us. Sitting around the library were the Duke, Stefano, Maria Jammalo, and Concettina Pando, Angelina’s grandmother.

“Sorry we don’t have presents for everyone,” Marco said, “but nobody told us all of you would be here.”

“Do not worry about it, Marco,” the Duke said.

Marco and I set two packages under the tree and greeted everyone. We had only been talking with the Duke's guests for a few minutes when a maid announced that our dinner was ready. When we were seated at the huge table but had not commenced eating, the Duke stood up to get our attention. "There is an announcement that needs to be made before we begin," he said, looking pointedly at Stefano.

"I'm happy to announce that Maria Jammalo has consented to become my wife," Stefano said.

A toast was offered in honor of the happy couple, and we drank to their bright future. "Which one of you will be moving?" Marco said.

"Maria is going to sell her business to her son," Stefano said, "and she will be moving here to Aragoni."

"Well done, Stefano," Marco said.

The meal was excellent and the conversation great, but we were glad to go back to our building and up to our apartment. The boys were asleep and the babysitter left, leaving us alone in the apartment. "Want to take a nap?" I asked Marco.

"How about something else, followed by a nap?"

"You're on."

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CHAPTER 33

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*Marco*

DANI and I enjoyed a wonderful Christmas followed by an extremely quiet New Year's Eve. For once, we had not invited guests, nor had we accepted any invitations. We let Lucia have the night off to visit with her increasing circle of friends at the university, and we stayed at home with the boys. I walked into my office one morning in mid-January and, as was my custom, looked over my schedule of appointments. I was surprised to see that it contained a very familiar name in a time slot that was usually left vacant.

My receptionist ushered Angelina and my father in at twelve on the dot. "What a surprise," I said. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is more than all right," Angelina said. "We've just come from my gynecologist."

"And?"

"I'm pregnant," she said.

"Let me be the first to congratulate both of you."

"Thank you, Marco," she said, and Father nodded his agreement.

"We have come to take you and Dani to lunch," Father said.

"Great, I'll give him a call."

"Give who a call?" Dani said as he walked into my office.

"You should knock when I'm with a patient."

"Not when this particular patient's husband instructs me to do otherwise. You guys look happy."

"And well they should be," I said.

“I’m pregnant,” Angelina said.

“That’s wonderful,” Dani said.

“And we are going to take the two of you to lunch,” Father said.

“That’s good, because I’m hungry.”

We went to a nice little restaurant near the hospital and had a very pleasant time over lunch. Angelina’s enthusiasm was boundless, and she kept babbling happily about wanting to fill her house with a dozen children as soon as it was built. After lunch, they dropped us off at the hospital and we walked to the elevator together.

“That was a pleasant diversion,” Dani said.

“No kidding.” I looked at my watch. “I have a patient in a few minutes, babe. Got to run.”

“See you at five,” he said.

Nothing worthy of note happened over the next few months, other than a quiet birthday celebration when the boys turned four. Then when classes ended for Lucia at the end of May, we moved back to our house on the mountain and began to drive to work every day. It was such a relief to be able to actually drive ourselves with only one security car trailing us. After the bad guys had been wiped out by their rivals in the Piedmont region, our security people had finally decided that the threat to our safety was effectively gone—not that we were careless in any way. Signor Piedmont Winery had been tried, convicted, and executed by the end of March.

In June we flew down to Calabria to attend the wedding of Stefano and Maria and stopped by Grandmother’s villa in Tuscany for a couple of days on the way back to Aragoni, even though the travel disrupted Dani’s dialysis schedule somewhat. It was not a bad visit, given that my mother was more or less herself while we were there. Grandmother promised to come to Aragoni in August and spend a week with us, and we flew home in a relatively relaxed mood. A few days after we got home, Dani came to my office at five, clearly in a bad mood.

“What’s up?” I said.

“It’s been almost a year since the attack.”

“I know, I have a calendar too.”

“How long am I gonna have to wait for a transplant?” he said.

“As long as it takes. What’s the problem? You’re moving up the list day

by day.”

“Not fast enough. I want this to be over with.”

“There’s no way to speed things up, you know that as well as I do.”

“I guess,” he said.

“And you’re doing better than expected with the dialysis.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Let’s go home and I’ll take your mind off of things for a while.”

“Please,” he said.

We drove straight home and immediately went upstairs to bed for a while. Later, we went out onto the terrace and settled down in the chaise lounges—after we had pushed them together so that we could hold hands while lying on them.

“Feel better?” I said.

“For the moment.”

“Let’s focus on a problem that we can solve.”

“What problem?” he said.

“Lucia will graduate next year, and we’re gonna have to find a replacement for her.”

“Shit,” he said. “I’d forgotten about that. When should we begin the search?”

“First of the year, maybe. That’ll give us five months.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance she’ll stay on, is there?”

“Babe,” I said, “she wants to go for a master’s degree, and the one she needs isn’t offered locally at the moment.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“On the other hand, the boys are starting in the four-year-old kindergarten program this fall, and in two years they’ll be in school full time.”

“What’s your point?” he said.

“Simply that we don’t need someone full time if they’re going to be spending that many hours a week in school, and if Lucia’s replacement doesn’t have to live with us in il Castello...”

“He or she doesn’t have to be a family member, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Let’s talk about that again in a few months,” he said. “Right now I want to go back to bed.”

“Are you sleepy?”

“No, fool, just recharged,” he said.

We got through the summer, including a ten-day visit from Grandmother and Mama. The day after we put the three women on the plane to fly home to Siena, Angelina gave birth to twins—a boy and a girl, who were promptly named Valerius and Serafina. It had been decided not to draw blood from the twins *in utero*, but the minute they were settled in the hospital nursery, blood samples from both were sent down to Dani’s lab. Twenty-four hours later, Father and I visited Dani in his very private inner office to learn the results of those tests. We settled into the chairs across from Dani’s desk and waited for him to say something.

“This is really interesting,” Dani said. “I wish I fully understood what it means.”

“Dani!” I said. “Don’t be a tease.”

“Sorry. Okay, both babies have the same genes. That is, they have the five genes that you and the Duke have, which are the same five genes that members of Angelina’s family carry. They also have the two unique genes that you guys have, and the two unique genes that Angelina has, for a total of nine genes. In addition, they have a tenth gene that is, as far as I can tell on such short notice, totally unique in the world. Bear in mind that I won’t be able to state that definitively without a great deal of additional research, and that takes time.”

“Okay, genius,” I said. “What does all of this mean?”

“It means, I suspect, that both Valerius and Serafina will pass all of those genes along to their offspring. My overeducated guess is that the tenth gene acts as some sort of controller in determining sexual characteristics, that is, in determining which set of genes is activated—one set for a boy, and the other set for a girl.”

“That is good news, yes?” Father said.

“I think it is, Duke. The problem is there’s just so much that I don’t know, and there’s absolutely no way I can find out, given the limitations on my research.”

“What you’re saying,” I said, “is that we need a half-dozen family



members who possess the necessary scientific credentials to help you.”

“Exactly. There are people studying some of the individual genes in various parts of the world, as a result of which I have plenty of paperwork on hand which documents what those genes do. Unfortunately for us, nobody is studying two of the five genes, nobody even knows about the other five, and worst of all, it isn’t possible to ask any researcher to look into how the genes interact.”

“We will encourage more family members to enter scientific fields,” Father said, “just as we are encouraging some of them to become doctors.”

“Well,” Dani said, “by the time a few scientific types emerge from the family gene pool, I’ll have enough raw data to keep them busy for years.”

“That sounds good,” Father said.

“Yes. In addition to testing for DNA, I’ve tested every blood sample I’ve gotten for every substance known to medical science.”

“From just the family members?” I said.

“No. I run every blood sample that I can get my hands on through every test available—I’ve even got the hospital’s vampires drawing extra blood every time they’re called upon to draw blood.”

“Why?”

“Think about it, Marco. Those first five genes are found in the general population, but only singularly or in pairs. Remember, I actually have two of them myself. If we have a huge database of test results from non-family members who possess individual genes, those results can be used as a baseline. And I’ve managed to keep an additional amount of every blood sample frozen for future use.”

“Again, why?” I said.

“Who knows what new tests might be discovered next year, or a dozen years from now?”

“That makes sense,” Father said.

“Yes, it does, but sooner or later I’m going to run out of freezer space.”

“Then I think it is time to move your samples to a larger and more secure facility,” Father said.

“You’re thinking about the secure storage facility in the tunnels, aren’t you?” I said.

“Exactly. We can expand those facilities as needed.”

Father went to the maternity ward to visit Angelina, and I spent a few minutes talking to Dani before I kissed him and went back to my office.

The boys began their kindergarten program in September, which gave Lucia much more free time. She had really blossomed from the shy girl who had taken charge of the boys from the moment they’d been brought home to the castle into a personable and quite social young woman. Dani and I discussed that from time to time. “Do you think she has a love life?” he said.

“If you’re using love as a euphemism for sex, no,” I said. “She dates, but I think she’s too tightly focused on her goals to get distracted.”

“You’re probably right.”

A few days later I spotted another familiar name when I checked my list of appointments. When my receptionist ushered Maria Argenti into my office, Stefano was with her. At my request, they settled down in the chairs opposite me.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” I said. “What can I do for you, Maria?”

“I want to take fertility drugs like Angelina did, and my gynecologist won’t give them to me.”

“What exactly does he say?” I said.

“That I should wait and let nature do what nature does best. When I reminded him that he had, with your cooperation, prescribed them for Angelina, he said that he could hardly have refused *il Duca’s* wife.”

“That’s understandable,” I said.

“True, and I could not tell him that I am now *il Duca’s* daughter-in-law.”

“No, you couldn’t, and of course I’ll help you, but I need to ask you a question or two first. You’re considerably older than Angelina, so I have to ask—are you still having what we call an ‘active phase’ every five years?”

“Yes, why?” she said.

“I had wondered if, like normal women, women in your family finally stopped having periods and went through some sort of menopause.”

“I am the oldest member of my family, and it hasn’t happened yet.”

“When was the last time you actually gave birth?” I said.

“My son who now runs the inn is your age.”

“And how long has it been since your last ‘active period’?”

“I don’t keep a record, but it was perhaps three years ago.”

“Do you plan to use the same type of artificial insemination that Angelina did?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

“That means Stefano will need to start making *donations* at the fertility clinic.”

“It’s on my schedule,” Stefano said.

“All right, then, let’s do it.”

I gave her a prescription for the same drug that Angelina had taken, for which she thanked me profusely. “It is so nice,” she said, “to finally be married to someone who will be around as long as I am.”

“Yes,” I said, “I can only imagine that it must make life somewhat less complicated.”

“Oh, Marco,” she said, “I am sorry. I forgot that your Danilo is not one of us.”

“It’s okay, I forget it myself most of the time, although it’s hard not to think about it once in a while.”

Angelina wanted to have the twins christened in a Roman Catholic Church but acquiesced when Father insisted that the sacrament take place in the Anglican cathedral with an assist from a Catholic priest. Dani and I paid a call on them a few weeks later. After we had spent an appropriate amount of time admiring the babies, Father invited us into the library for a glass of wine, and the conversation ultimately turned to the twins.

“I’ve been thinking about the implications of their having those ten genes,” Dani said.

“Yes?” I said.

“I wonder if they will have the capability of passing them along to all of their offspring.”

“You mean, even if they do not marry one of us?” Father said.

“Exactly. However, we won’t know until they are old enough to have children.”

“I’m not going to allow Serafina to become a brood mare,” Angelina said, somewhat indignantly.

“Of course not,” Dani said, “but Valerius could certainly supply the sperm to impregnate a surrogate mother—when he’s old enough.”

“Why would he want to do that?” she said.

“Well, my dear,” Father said, smiling broadly, “the process by which donated sperm is collected is one that adolescent boys find particularly enjoyable.”

“Whatever do you mean?” she said.

“I told you about the process, remember?”

“You mean.... Oh... oh, I see.”

“In any case,” I said, “that’s more than a dozen years away at least.”

“Yes, it is,” she said.

“It may well be a dozen years in the future,” I said, “but if what Dani suspects turns out to be the case, it has tremendous implications for this family.”

“Yes, I can see that it does,” Father said, “and we will institute some long-range contingency plans just in case.”

“What plans?” I said.

“I do not know yet, but I will give the task of preparing them to two or three very bright people, of that you may be sure.”

When Dani and I were back at home and in the privacy of our bedroom, he had a thoughtful look on his face. “Penny,” I said.

“I don’t think my thoughts are worth that much at the moment.”

“Something’s running through that fevered brain of yours, I can always tell.”

“The conversation we had at the Duke’s got me to thinking about the future—our future, that is.”

“And it’s gonna be wonderful, isn’t it?”

“But I’m going to get old eventually, and die,” he said.

“Are you ruling out the possibility of ever finding out how those genes work?”

“I’ll never find it out on my own,” he said. “Babe, it’s a huge task, and we need dozens of people working on it. You and I both know that isn’t going to happen for years, even decades.”

“Well,” I said, choosing my words carefully, “I don’t want to rain on that particular parade, but isn’t that a rather long-term problem?”

“You know it is.”

“Meanwhile,” I said, “you have a more important problem to deal with.”

“What...? Oh, you mean the interminable wait for a transplant?”

“Yes, that.”

“What of it?” he said. “I don’t have any control over the wait.”

“True, but you have considerable control over how well you deal with the wait, as well as the outcome.”

“Meaning?” he said.

“Been exercising lately?”

“Well... no.”

“Mind telling me why?” I said.

“I never seem to get around to it.”

“That’s what I thought, so starting Monday morning, you and I are going to begin making regular visits to the gym.”

“But...”

“No buts about it. You... me... gym... period.”

“Yeah, I guess we’d better,” he said.

“Damn straight. Now, are you gonna get undressed, or do I have to rip those clothes off you?”

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CHAPTER 34

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*Marco*

DISTRACTING Dani with sex worked, as it always did, but I couldn't get that troubling conversation out of my mind. In the several years that we'd known about my family's unusual health and longevity, he had seldom referred to it in terms of our relationship. With that in mind as the months rolled by, I kept an eye out for any sign that he might be suffering from depression. The triplets' fifth Christmas was memorable for all the right reasons, and we actually threw a small Christmas party. The new year began with extra heavy snow in the Alps, and the Duchy was packed with tourists for several weeks. We had a huge party in the spring for the boys' fifth birthday, and two days later, I received an urgent phone call from Malcolm only a few minutes after I arrived in my office.

"Good morning, Marco, Malcolm here," he said.

"Good morning, Malcolm. What can I do for you?"

"Can you spare me ten minutes before your first appointment?"

"Absolutely. Your office or mine?"

"I think you'd better come up here," he said.

"I'm on my way."

I hurried to the elevators and up to Malcolm's floor, where Marianna ushered me into his office without even buzzing him.

"Marco," Malcolm said when I came through the door. "Close the door behind you and have a seat at the conference table. I won't be a moment." He picked up his phone, pushed a button, and said, "Marianna, hold all of my calls until Dr. d'Argenzio leaves. Thank you."

He came over to the table and sat down beside me. "Okay, Malcolm," I

said, “you’ve certainly got my attention. What’s up?”

“We have a donor for Dani.”

“Wonderful... that’s good news.” My mind was instantly overwhelmed with thoughts of the transplant, thoughts of what that meant for Dani—and myself—and it took a conscious effort on my part to focus on Malcolm’s next words.

“Yes, but... it’s going to be a bit complicated.”

“Why?” I said.

“The potential donor is in a small city in a remote corner of South Africa.”

“Holy shit. That’s an awfully long way to transport an organ.”

“Just so,” he said. “That’s why we’re not going to transport the organ; we’re going to bring the donor here.”

“No kidding? How in the world can we do that?”

“The man is totally brain dead and on life support; as far as the local authorities have been able to determine, he has no known family—anywhere.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“Yes, isn’t it? To make a long story short, some money has changed hands, and more has been promised. Your father’s jet left the airport shortly after eleven last night carrying a portable gurney and two medical personnel.”

“I wonder why nobody called me?” I said.

“What would have been the point? The Duke gave his okay, and the wheels were set in motion.”

“Wow. So what happens when the... I started to say ‘body’, but that doesn’t apply, does it? What happens when the donor arrives?”

“Three surgeons from Switzerland will be here waiting. They will perform the transplant on Dani, and another transplant on a patient they’ll be bringing with them. They will also harvest the remainder of the usable organs and ship them back to Geneva, where other patients will be waiting.”

“That will take one heck of a lot of coordination, won’t it?”

“Yes, it will, but these people have done this before. Remember our conversation from two years ago? This sort of thing happens fairly often, but for reasons which should be obvious, it doesn’t get talked about.”

“Yeah, I can see that. How good is the tissue match?” I said.

"If I can believe the report I have in front of me, it's the best I've ever seen. Needless to say, we'll double-check that the minute the donor arrives in house."

"Do we know when that will be?"

"Not yet, but we'll have a definite time as soon as the plane leaves South Africa with the donor on board. I was told to figure twelve hours of flight time each way including one fuel stop, which means that if all goes well, the donor will be here a little after eleven tonight, the blood work can be done, and the surgery can begin first thing tomorrow morning."

"I just realized why you aren't your usual perky self—you've been up half the night working on this, haven't you?" I said.

"Not quite half the night—I finally got to bed around two," he said. "The initial telephone call came yesterday afternoon, which is a good thing, because the funds could be wired while the banks were still open."

"I don't even want to know how much money was involved."

"If you're referring to Aragoni money, not as much as you might think. We are getting a considerable discount for the use of the Duke's plane and our facilities."

"I wonder if I should tell Dani about this?"

"I wouldn't, if I were you. At least not until the plane has landed."

"You're probably right. I'll be on pins and needles for the next twelve hours, and I can't begin to imagine how he'll feel at the news."

"He'll certainly have to be told tonight for the simple reason that he's the person best qualified to do that kind of blood work, and since he's the patient, it's a given that he won't want anyone else to do it."

"Yeah. Thanks, Malcolm," I said.

"My pleasure, Marco."

I somehow managed to get through the first half of the day without letting this news distract me from my patients. While Dani and I were at lunch, my cell phone rang—it was Malcolm telling me that the plane was on its way back, ETA shortly after eleven.

"Thanks, Malcolm," I said. "I'll be waiting for your call."

"What did Malcolm want?" Dani said.

"Just something he wanted me to take care of. How are you feeling



today?" I said.

"Same as always, why?"

"You've been working so hard, I worry about you."

"Now that you mention it, I am a bit tired," he said.

"Then as your unofficial doctor, I prescribe a nap. As soon as you get back to your office, lock the door, open up that cot you have in the back room, and make use of it."

"I might just do that."

I saw my last patient at three thirty, spent thirty minutes on paperwork, and went to Dani's office. "Ready to go home?" I said.

"Quitting early, are we?"

"Last patient's gone, paperwork's done, why not?"

"Two ticks," he said.

"Did you take a nap?" I said as we walked to the tram stop.

"Sorry, never got around to it because the phone started ringing."

"Yeah, Mr. Bell has a lot for which to answer, doesn't he?"

"No shit."

When we got home we had an early supper, played with the boys for a bit, and went into the den to use our laptops. "Damn," Dani said a few minutes later. "I can't keep my eyes open. Mind if I go to bed?"

"Not at all. I'll see to it that you're not disturbed."

"Thanks, babe," he said. "Good night."

He gave me a perfunctory kiss and left the den. If I had measured the dosage correctly, the sedative I'd slipped into his drink would give him at least three hours of sound sleep. Pleased with my own cleverness, I returned to my messages. I finished what I was doing on the computer, shut it down, and went into the living room to settle down with a book and a glass of wine. The boys were asleep, Lucia was doing her schoolwork, and the apartment was quiet. So quiet that when my cell phone rang at eleven thirty, I jumped in surprise.

"Hello, Malcolm," I said, noting the display.

"The donor will be at the hospital by the time you get there."

"We'll be there. Thanks, Malcolm."

## CHAPTER 35

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*Dani*

“WAKE up, Dani. Wake up,” someone was saying over and over again.

I fought my way up through layers of sleep, part of me wanting to respond to the urgent voice, but the part of me that didn’t want to respond won the battle, and once again I succumbed to sleep.

“Come on, babe, this isn’t like you.”

“Go away,” I heard myself saying, “and leave me alone, I wanta sleep some more.”

“Danilo Rosati, get your ass out of that bed right now. You’re needed at the hospital, stat.”

Marco’s use of the word “stat” got my attention, and I sat up. “Say what?” I said.

“There’s a patient on the way, and your expertise is needed for some emergency blood work.”

“Really?” I said, and I started pulling on my clothes.

“Yes, really. They’ll be waiting for you, and I’ve got a driver downstairs waiting for both of us.”

“This must be important,” I said. “Who’s the patient?”

“Your organ donor.”

“What?” I almost yelled.

“Get dressed and I’ll explain in the car. Now move it.”

“I can’t believe I went to sleep so early.”

“There’s a very good reason for that,” he said.

“There is?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I slipped something in your drink this evening.”

“Why?” I said.

“Because I was expecting this call and I wanted you to be rested. I’ve got coffee waiting for us to take along in the car.”

“I’ll get you for that,” I said.

“No, you won’t. If you’ll stop and think things through, you’ll understand why it was necessary.”

“I don’t have enough information to ‘think things through’ at the moment. I need input.”

In the elevator he said, “I just realized that what I’m going to tell you will have to wait until we’re in the privacy of your office. The fewer people that know about this the better.”

“Now I am curious.”

“In good time,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Sal was waiting for us at the entrance to the elevator. “Sal,” I said when I was in the car, “surely you’re much too senior to be dragged out in the middle of the night like this.”

“I was told it was important, Dani,” he said, “so I didn’t ask questions.”

“Thank you, Sal,” Marco said. “To the hospital, if you please—as quickly as you can get us there consistent with safety.”

“You’ve got it, Marco,” Sal said.

To my surprise, Malcolm was waiting for us when we walked into the hospital. “Hello, Malcolm,” I said, “fancy meeting you here.”

“This was too important to entrust to anyone else,” he said. “I presume Marco told you why you’re here?”

“In broad terms, yes, but he’s been a little shy about the details.”

“Dani,” Marco said, “I wasn’t about to say anything in the car. Even Sal doesn’t need to know all the details about this.”

Malcolm was speaking into his cell phone, and I caught the end of his conversation—“We’re on the way to the lab right now. Thanks.”

When we got to my lab, one of the vampires was waiting for us—referring to the phlebotomists who draw blood as vampires seemed to be the order of the day in hospitals everywhere. Malcolm signed for the vials of blood while I unlocked the outer lab. “Here you go, Dani,” Malcolm said. “Marco and I will tell you everything as soon as you get to a stopping point.”

“You didn’t use all the blood...,” Marco said thirty minutes later.

“That’s because I’m taking what’s left of it into the inner lab and running DNA tests.”

“Why?”

“Force of habit. I run DNA on every blood sample that comes through here.”

Malcolm handed me a stack of paperwork and said, “Here’s the data from the patients to be matched.”

“Patients? Patients plural?” I said.

“We’ll talk when you’re able to listen without it causing you to make a mistake,” Malcolm said.

A few minutes later, I pushed a few buttons on my equipment and said, “Talk.”

I watched my equipment while I listened to Malcolm and Marco explain what was about to happen in our little hospital.

“And the surgeons checked into a local hotel earlier this evening,” Malcolm said. “They’ll get a good night’s sleep and be ready to operate in the morning.”

“What about the other patient?” Marco said.

“Admitted to the hospital a few hours ago.”

“And transportation for the organs?” he said.

“The jet which brought the surgeons here is waiting to take off for Geneva at a moment’s notice,” Malcolm said.

A piece of paper emerged from one of my wonderful machines, and I took a look at it. Several pieces of paper followed, and I examined them as well. “Okay, Malcolm,” I said, handing him the papers, “my expert opinion is that the work done at the other end was accurate.”

“Good, then I want you to go home and get a good night’s sleep. You need to check yourself into the hospital tomorrow morning around seven,”

Malcolm said.

“As soon as I run the DNA on this blood,” I said.

“Babe,” Marco said, “must you?”

“I’m a creature of habit, so yes, I must.”

Malcolm left the lab, and I pushed the buttons that unlocked the door to the inner lab. “How long will this take?” Marco said.

“Not long. Even less if you’ll shut up and watch.”

It didn’t take long because, thanks to il Duca’s generosity, I had the absolute latest and greatest of everything. I read the printout and whistled. “Holy shit, babe,” I said. “You’d better have a look at this.”

He read the document I handed him. “Isn’t that interesting,” he said. “I’ll make a couple of calls in the morning and get to work on this. Right now, however, I want you home and in bed. You’re gonna take another small dose of that sedative and sleep until six, promise?”

“Only if you’ll promise to screw my brains out first,” I said.

“That, my love, can be arranged.”

## CHAPTER 36

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### *Marco*

SAL drove Dani and me back to the castle, and I thanked him again for coming out so late in the evening.

“It was important, yes?” Sal asked.

“Yes,” I said, “it was important. Dani will be checking into the hospital in the morning to receive a new kidney.”

“That is good news. Dani, I will pray for you before I call it a night.”

“Thank you, Sal,” Dani said.

“What time shall I be here in the morning, Marco?” Sal said.

“Six thirty, please, Sal, and thank you again.”

“Good night,” Sal said. He got back in the car and left.

As soon as we were in our bedroom, I made good on my promise but was careful not to drag things out too long. Finally, I said, “Okay, babe. That’s it. Time for a pill and sleep.”

“I won’t argue with that. There’s so much stuff running around my head right now that I doubt if I could get to sleep without drugs. Are you coming back to bed yourself?”

“Just as soon as I send a couple of e-mails. I need to drop this little bombshell on the appropriate parties, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” he said. “How’re you gonna handle it?”

“Ask them to meet me at the hospital at seven and tell them that it’s bloody urgent.”

“And if they don’t get up in time to receive your messages?”

“There’s always the telephone.”

“That’ll work.”

I went into the master bathroom, retrieved a pill, and took it to Dani along with a glass of water. I broke the pill into two pieces and gave him one of them.

“Here you go,” I said. “Swallow and drink.”

“No problem. Is the other piece for you?”

“You bet. My brain is in turmoil right now as well, kind of like Hedley Lamarr in *Blazing Saddles*, remember what he said?”

“Not really,” he said.

“My mind is a raging torrent, flooded with rivulets of thought cascading into a waterfall of creative alternatives.”

“Oh, yeah, now I do, and the other guy said something like ‘Gosh, Mr. Lamarr, you talk prettier than a twenty-dollar whore.’”

“Yeah.”

I went to the den and sent three e-mail messages; then I printed a short note to Lucia. I left the note on the kitchen table and returned to our bedroom, where I set the alarm, took my half of the pill, stripped, and crawled into bed next to Dani.

“G’night, babe,” he said sleepily. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The next thing I knew, I was groping for the alarm. Having silenced it, I rolled onto my side to wake up Dani, who was already wide awake and staring at me.

“Quickie?” he said.

“Sure, but it’s gotta be very quick.”

We took care of each other’s needs, followed by a quick shower and shave. When we were dressed, we had just enough time to get downstairs. I stuck my head in the kitchen doorway long enough to tell Lucia we were leaving.

“Gotta run,” I said. “I left you a note on the kitchen table last night.”

“I read it, Cousin Marco. Good luck, Dani,” she said.

“Thanks,” Dani said.

“Come on, the car is waiting.”

At the hospital Dani was led upstairs by an orderly, so I said, “I’ll catch up with you in a bit.”

“Go take care of business,” he said.

I went upstairs to the surgical waiting area and found three men waiting for me—Stefano, Trevor, and Trevor’s father, Ramsey Price.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” I said.

“What’s going on, Marco,” Trevor asked. “Your e-mail said this is urgent.”

“It is,” I said. “Follow me, please.”

I led them to a room adjacent to the operating rooms. There was a patient hooked up to a respirator occupying the only bed in the room. He was blond, somewhat tanned, and appeared to be in his mid- to late-thirties. His head was swathed in bandages, but there were enough blond hairs sticking out from under them to identify his hair color, and his face was fully visible except for the respirator mask and tube.

“Trevor,” I said, “why don’t you and your father take a look at this guy and tell me if he looks familiar.”

They walked over to the bed and looked down at the patient. “What’s the matter with him?” Ramsey said.

“Accident. Severe brain damage, so much so that he’s in a totally irreversible vegetative state.”

“What’s so important about him?” Trevor said.

“In a couple of hours, Dani is going to get one of his kidneys. You didn’t answer my question.”

“What?” Ramsey said. “Oh, yes, he does look familiar in a way. I have the strange feeling that I’ve seen him somewhere before—a long time ago, maybe.”

“Trevor?” I said.

“He sort of looks a little bit like my cousin Rufus,” Trevor said.

“You’re right,” Ramsey said, “he could almost be Rufus.”

“Rufus?” I parroted.

“Rufus Parker,” Ramsey said very softly. “One of Trevor’s cousins. He went to serve in the First Boer War and never came back.”



"I didn't know there was more than one Boer War," I said.

"Oh, yes," Ramsey said. "The First Boer War, or Anglo-Boer War, was in 1880 and 1881. The Second Anglo-Boer War, which is the one that people outside of the UK tend to know about, started in 1899 and lasted for about three years."

"He was reported as missing in action," Trevor said.

"That explains it," I said. "This guy is from South Africa, and Dani ran his DNA last night. He's definitely related to Trevor, and descended from you, Ramsey."

"Then it is Rufus," Trevor said.

"No, it isn't Rufus," Ramsey said, "but he could certainly be one of Rufus's descendants," Ramsey said.

"That means Rufus survived," Trevor said. "I wonder why he never came home, or at least wrote to us?"

"Lots of things happen to men in war," I said. "Concussion, for example, can result in permanent amnesia. He could well have been left on a battlefield for dead and rescued by parties unknown."

"Now that I've had some time to think about it," Ramsey said, "it may be that our Rufus simply decided to disappear."

"Really?" Trevor said.

"Yes. He was totally unhappy in England. In fact, I seem to recall that he ran away from home several times when he was quite young. Yes, I can definitely picture Rufus deciding to drop out of sight in South Africa where nobody knew him."

"I guess that explains why I'm here," Stefano said.

"Absolutely," I said. "According to the paperwork this guy's name is Seth Partland, and as far as anyone in South Africa knows, he has no known family."

"How did he get here?" Ramsey said.

"Let's go somewhere secure," I said, "and I'll tell you. In fact, why don't we go down to my office? My receptionist won't be there for another hour at least. We've already said too much in a potentially un-secure area."

When we arrived on my floor, I led them into my inner office and closed the door behind us. "Okay, here's what I know, and you'll understand in a couple of minutes why this has to go no further than this room."

I laid it out for them, starting with Malcolm's telephone call. When I stopped talking, Trevor said, "There really isn't any limit to what Grandfather will do when it comes to looking after his family, is there?"

"Looking after the family is what he does," Stefano said, "and he has done it many times in many ways over the years."

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," I said, "I need to go see a certain patient before he goes under the knife."

"Of course," Ramsey said. "You've given us plenty to think about."

"You can say that again," Trevor said.

I locked my office door, and we went our separate ways. It took me a minute or two to find out what room Dani had been assigned, and I hurried in that direction. "Well?" he said when I entered the room, "did you drop my little bombshell on the appropriate people?"

"You could say that," I said. "Actually Ramsey and Trevor both say that your donor resembles a member of their family who went to South Africa to fight in a war in 1880 and was reported missing."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I told Dani what I had learned.

"Aren't families something?" he said.

"No kidding."

"Listen, Marco," Dani said, suddenly serious, "I want you to promise me something."

"Babe, you're not gonna die."

"Shut up and let me finish," he said.

"Shutting up."

"Please don't call Mom until I'm back in the recovery room, promise?"

"Yes, I can promise that with no reservations, although you could make a case for letting her suffer and worry about the surgery."

"Babe, it's not worth it," he said. "She's come a long way in just a couple of years, so let's cut her some slack."

"I know... my bad."

"Damn straight. Now, do one more thing for me," he said.

"What?"

"I want you to take a black marker and write 'this one' in big black letters on my lower back just above the bad kidney, and draw an arrow on my belly pointing in that direction," he said.

"You're kidding?"

"No, I'm not. You read about that shit all the time, and don't tell me I'm crazy."

"Yeah, I have to admit it can and does happen."

"Yep," he said.

"Got a marker?"

"As it happens, I brought one with me from my desk at home. It's on the table right there in front of you."

I took the marker, uncapped it, and said, "Roll over on the appropriate side."

"Draw the arrow on my belly first."

I drew the arrow, then repeated myself. "Roll over now."

He complied. Then I took the marker and wrote what he dictated. "Feel better?" I said when he was flat on his back once more.

"You know I do."

Malcolm came into the room, followed by a tall, slender man with graying hair who was wearing surgical greens. "Are we ready?" Malcolm said.

"As we'll ever be," Dani said.

"This is Dr. Rast from Geneva," Malcolm said.

"Dr. Rast, your patient is Dr. Rosati, and this is Dr. d'Argenzio."

"Malcolm," I said, "you're speaking English."

"I asked him to," Dr. Rast said, "because I'm much more comfortable in English than I am Italian."

"I should think so," I said. "Even I can recognize the accent. Eton or Harrow?"

"Eton, and you're very observant."

"I have five-year-old triplets," I said, "and I'm torn between sending them to Eton and sending them to my old school."

“Which is?” Dr. Rast said.

“Groton. It’s in Massachusetts.”

“It’s a fine school,” he said, “and I’m well acquainted with it. Now, to business. Has Dr. Sanderson explained my approach to you?”

“No, he hasn’t,” Dani said.

“Most transplant surgeons, as you probably know, place the new kidney in the patient’s abdomen, where it will be held in place by the viscera. I prefer to place the new kidney *in situ*, as it were, replacing the old one; and if I may say so, the results I’ve obtained over the years have proven that to be the better choice.”

“You’re the doctor,” Dani said.

“Exactly,” Dr. Rast said. “Any questions?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve worked in hospitals for a long time and I live with a doctor, so I know what to expect.”

“Very well, then. I’ll see you in the operating room.”

He and Malcolm left the room, and I looked at Dani. “Well?”

“Well, what?” he said.

“What did you think?”

“I sort of liked him, and self-confidence is a good quality in a surgeon.”

“Good, so did I.”

I kissed him thoroughly a couple of seconds before a nurse came in to give him some pre-op medication, and a few minutes later his bed was wheeled out of the room; I followed it as far as the surgical area. “See you later,” I said.

“Marco,” Dani said, “there’s no need for you to sit around doing nothing for the next five or six hours. Go home. Go to the baths and have a massage, whatever. Anything other than sitting around waiting, okay?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think about it, do it!”

The bed was wheeled through the double doors and out of sight, so I went to the waiting area and sat for a couple of minutes. I thought long and hard about what Dani had said and realized that he was absolutely correct, so I went in search of Malcolm.

When I entered Malcolm's office, he looked up from his desk and said, "Marco. I'm surprised to see you here, is everything all right?"

"Yes, it is. The last thing Dani said before he was wheeled into the operating area was 'Don't sit around for hours waiting', and I realized that he was right. So I'm going to go back to il Castello and visit the baths, maybe have a massage; anything to take my mind off of things."

"That's the most sensible thing I've heard someone say in a very long time. And yes, he's right. The surgery will take five hours at the very least, so there's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't use at least four of them productively, even if you're only engaging in creative loafing."

"Thanks, Malcolm," I said. "I wasn't sure who to talk to downstairs; could you call someone and give them my cell phone number? I'll have it with me, even in the baths."

"Consider it done. Now take his advice and go."

Feeling better about myself, I went down to the ground floor and out to the tram stop. When I got off the tram at the castle complex, instead of going up to the apartment, I went to the baths and spent some time in the *calidarium*. Eventually, I moved to the *tepidarium*, and when I had cooled down a bit, I treated myself to a massage.

"Andreas," I said as I walked through the door to the massage room, "I'm surprised to see you on duty this early in the day."

"That goes for me as well," he said. "I swapped time slots with another guy, what's your excuse?"

I told him what was going on and why I was in the baths. "If you need distraction, Marco," he said, "we could go somewhere for a while."

"Enough of that, Andreas. You've got a boyfriend and so do I."

"You can't blame a guy for trying, Marco."

"What would Nick say if he heard you?"

"He'd probably ask to join us."

"You're kidding, aren't you?" I said.

"Not at all. Nick and I are not strangers to the *ménage à trois*. We don't do it often, but if the right man comes along, why not?"

"If it works for you and Nick, fine, but it's not my cup of tea, okay?"

"That's because you were raised in America and have that puritan

streak in you.”

“Whatever. Are you gonna give me a massage or not?”

“Of course I am. Hop on the table. Shall I leave the room while you undress?”

“What would be the point after all these years?”

“True, but I am required to offer.”

I slipped out of my robe and positioned myself facedown on his table.

He worked on my shoulders for a couple of minutes and said, “Your muscles are all tied up in knots, Marco.”

“Yes, I know. That’s one of the reasons I’m here on your table.”

“Not to worry, Andreas will take care of that.”

An hour later I went to the showers and soaped my body thoroughly—Andreas had been unusually liberal with the scented massage oils, and rinsing them off in the *calidarium* was seriously frowned upon. From the showers, I went back to the baths and actually worked my way from *calidarium* to *tepidarium* and finally to the *frigidarium*. Totally refreshed, I took another shower, dressed, and went to my office to retrieve my laptop. I had planned to take it with me up to the waiting room, but the clock told me that I had only managed to kill a little under three hours, so I settled down at my desk and spent more than an hour clearing out my entire backlog of paperwork. Then, feeling quite pleased with myself and totally virtuous, I went back to the surgical waiting room carrying my laptop with me.

When I got there, there were a number of strangers milling about, mostly looking nervous and upset, so I told the nurse in charge where I would be and slipped into the relative quiet of the doctor’s lounge. I hadn’t told anyone about a donor having been found, so I spent some time composing a sort of “one size fits all” document that I could copy and paste as needed into the e-mails that would have to be sent once the surgery was over. Eventually, Dr. Rast appeared in the lounge and said, “Dr. Rosati is on his way to the recovery room. Everything went as expected, and I have high hopes for his success.”

“Thank you, Dr. Rast. I have high hopes as well.”

“By the way, everyone in the OR got a kick out of those markings on his abdomen and lower back.”

“He’s been around hospitals too long,” I said. “So are you pleased with the results of the transplant?”

“He is young, very fit, and in twenty years of performing transplant surgery, I can’t recall ever seeing a closer tissue match. All of which is in his favor.”

“Good,” I said. “When do you go back to Geneva?”

“Not until tomorrow afternoon, but in any case not until my patient is out of danger. One of your local nephrologists will take over the patient’s care after I leave.”

“How is the other transplant proceeding?”

“Last I heard it was going well, but it was a much more complicated procedure given that it involved both the liver and one kidney. If you will excuse me, I must go to the other operating theater and assist.”

“By all means, go back to work. And thank you.”

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CHAPTER 37

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*Marco*

DR. RAST left the lounge, and I settled back on the sofa feeling more than a little bit relieved. I came within an inch of sending the message I had drafted but decided to wait until I could report that I had actually spoken to Dani. I got a little bit too comfortable and closed my eyes for a minute.

“Dr. d’Argenzio....” I was in the middle of a strange dream and thought that I heard my name being called. “This is my dream, go away.”

“Dr. d’Argenzio, wake up.”

I came wide awake and looked for the source of the voice—it was a nurse. “Sorry, I must have dozed off.”

“You were sound asleep,” she said. “Dr. Rosati is in ICU Ward 1 now if you want to see him.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right there just as soon as I splash some cold water on my face.”

I put my laptop in its carrying case and, leaving it on the sofa, went into the adjacent bathroom and washed my face with cold water. Satisfied that I was alert, I returned to the lounge, retrieved the case, and went to the ICU area. I experienced a strange sense of déjà vu when I entered ICU Ward 1 and saw Dani in the nearest bed once again with wires and tubes running from various parts of his body. I stood for a moment looking at his still form, then settled down in a chair beside the bed to wait. A few minutes later, he began to stir and return to consciousness. He opened his eyes and looked at me.

“Welcome back,” I said.

“Yeah,” he sort of croaked.

“Let me give you a sip or two of water.”



He sucked at the straw once I got it between his lips. "Thanks," he said, his voice sounding better.

"Where...?"

"ICU. You came through with flying colors, or so I'm told."

"Then why don't I feel better?" he said.

"Perhaps because you've been in surgery for more than five hours."

"Yeah. I guess that would do it."

A nurse bustled in and began to check his vitals. "Looking good," she said.

"Yeah," he said.

"I'll be back in a minute and give you something to help you relax."

"I am relaxed, sort of," he said.

"Perhaps, but you won't be once the effects of the anesthesia totally wear off."

"Yeah."

She left the room, and I stood up and leaned over the bed.

"What...?" he said.

I covered his mouth with mine for a long minute, then sat back down. "*Carpe momentum*," I said.

"Yeah."

"Babe, you really need to expand your vocabulary beyond monosyllabic answers to questions."

"Funny."

"Oh, goody, that's two syllables."

"Sorry, but I don't exactly feel like having a scintillating conversation right now."

"That's much better."

I stood up and kissed him again.

"Is that my reward?" he said.

"For now."

I held his hand, and we sort of locked eyes for a few minutes until the

nurse returned.

“How do you feel?” she asked Dani.

“Lousy.”

“I should think so. You’ll feel better after you take this.”

He dutifully swallowed the proffered pill and drank from the cup she held for him.

“Dr. d’Argenzio,” she said, “why don’t you go home and get some rest. That little pill will keep him in a twilight state until early evening.”

“Yeah, I guess I can do that.”

“I should hope so. I understand you were out cold in the lounge earlier.”

“We didn’t get a lot of sleep last night, what with one thing and another,” I said.

I squeezed Dani’s hand, said, “See you later,” picked up my laptop case, and left.

When I got back to the apartment, it was quiet. Lucia was at the university, and the boys were at their kindergarten. I went straight to the den, settled down at my desk, and sent my e-mail messages. Then I went online, checked the schedule of the US-based Gulfstream, and made some notes. Armed with that information, I looked up a telephone number and dialed. It was an international call, which took a few seconds to connect.

“Hello,” a female voice said.

“Mrs. Rosati?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Marco. Marco d’Argenzio. I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“I’m an early riser. Has something happened?”

“Something good has happened,” I said. “I just came from the hospital. Dani has a new kidney.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. How is he?”

“As well as can be expected after five hours of surgery. I just sent you an e-mail with the details, and I’m sort of dead on my feet right now from being up most of the night. If you and your mother want to come see him, there is a flight out of New York two days from now that can swing by Boston and pick you up. I know that’s short notice, but it’s the only window of opportunity right now. After that, the jet will be shuttling between South

America and Australia for a couple of weeks.”

“My father is ill, so I know Mama can’t make it. Can I bring one of Dani’s sisters?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “The details are in the e-mail, just let me know by this evening.”

“You said the plane will be tied up for two weeks. I don’t think we can stay quite that long.”

“We’ll get you home on a commercial flight if necessary.”

“Good. Thank you so much, Marco, for calling.”

“You’re very welcome.”

As soon as she was off the line, I called Grandmother and told her the news—she had stubbornly resisted all attempts to persuade her to use a computer. Calls complete, I went to the master suite, took a shower, and crawled into bed. I don’t know how long I would have slept if hunger hadn’t wakened me. I looked groggily at the bedside clock and saw that it was nearly three, so I dragged myself into the bathroom and took as cold a shower as I could stand. The cold water got my juices flowing, and, dressed in warm-ups, I went to the kitchen in search of food. Rather than eat at the kitchen table, I carried a plate containing two sandwiches into the den along with a glass of iced tea and settled down at the computer. I was still there at four when the apartment was filled with the noise of three little boys arriving home from kindergarten. Prompted by an urge which surprised me, I went into the living room and was immediately surrounded and overwhelmed by demands for attention.

“I’m glad to see you too, guys,” I said. “Why don’t you go sit down at the kitchen table, and we’ll have some juice.”

“How is Dani?” Lucia said.

“He has a new kidney, and he seems to be doing well.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.”

“Yes, it is, and I’m trying not to think about the many things that can go wrong.”

“Where’s Papa Dani?” his namesake said.

“He’s in the hospital, Bernardo,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because he had an operation and the doctors gave him a new kidney. Remember? We told you that one of his kidneys wasn’t working?”

We had, in fact, had a number of lengthy discussions with the boys concerning what kidneys do and how important they were.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Can we go see him?” Marcus said.

“Not yet, but maybe in a couple of days, and only if you can be very good and very quiet. There are a lot of sick people in the hospital, and noisy little boys aren’t good for them.”

“I’ll be as quiet as a mouse,” Marcus said.

“So will I,” Bernardo said.

“Me too,” Giovanni said.

“That settles it,” I said. “Now, who wants something to drink?”

They consumed some juice and crackers, then begged me to go to their room and play with them, which I did. I sat on the floor of their room for quite a while, allowing myself to be wonderfully distracted, until a glance at my watch told me that I needed to get moving. I stood and said, “Okay, guys. I’ve got to change clothes so I can go back to the hospital and see Papa Dani, okay?”

They reluctantly agreed, and I went to get dressed. Before I left the apartment, I checked my e-mail and found a message which required that I spend a couple of minutes on the Internet. Father had long since given me access to the US-based plane schedules, along with the authority to add flights as needed—this access and authority had come in handy more than once. It was easy to arrange for the flight from New York to make a stop in Boston before crossing the pond, and Mrs. Rosati would receive an e-mail from the pilot or co-pilot telling her when to be at the airport. I hugged each of the boys and headed downstairs to the tram. When I walked into Dani’s room, it was apparent that he was alert and more or less comfortable, as he was carrying on an animated conversation with Gert.

“Look who’s here,” he said cheerfully. “Did you get some rest?”

“Yeah. If it hadn’t been for the fact that I somehow skipped breakfast and lunch, I’d probably still be asleep—my stomach woke me up just before three. Hi, Gert. How’s our boy doing?”

“Very well,” she said.

“Yeah,” Dani said, “fluids are going in one end and coming out the other. I expect them to come in here any minute and switch the bags.”

“Switch the... oh, you’re thinking of that scene in *Catch-22*.”

“Yeah.”

“Has Dr. Rast been by this afternoon?” I said.

“You just missed him, but Gert was here and she played twenty questions with him—she can give you all that jargon-filled information.”

“You really are feeling better, aren’t you?”

“For the moment, but those wonderful pills could wear off anytime.”

“Babe,” I said. “That’s what the drip is for.”

“Yeah. So, have you spread the word far and wide?”

“Been there, done that. And if you’re in a private room in a couple of days, the tribe has been promised a visit, contingent on their very best behavior.”

“Is that wise?” Gert said. “Bringing five-year-olds to a building full of sick people, I mean.... Think of the things they could be exposed to.”

“It’s okay. The men in my family don’t get sick—ever.”

“Those little boys hardly qualify as men,” she said.

“Trust me, Gert. It’s all right. In fact, Dani would be in more danger from them than they would be from the stuff floating around the air in here.”

“You’re probably right,” she said. “They’re in kindergarten, and kids that age bring all kinds of bugs home with them. I remember a number of conversations with the pediatrician when my kids brought the latest disease home—I would complain about them being sick and he would say, ‘And where do they go every day, Mommy?’”

“If it’ll make you feel better, they can wear masks.”

“Promise you’ll do just that and I’ll shut up,” she said.

“You’ve got it. No hugs and kisses for Papa Dani from the boys.”

“That’s no fun,” Dani said.

“Perhaps, but she has a point. The drugs you’re taking to keep your body from rejecting that new kidney also lower your resistance to infections, as you ought to know.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said.

“Do you also know when you’ll be in a private room?”

“Probably tomorrow, if I’m a good boy.”

“See that you are, then,” I said.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“I’ve got to get back to work,” Gert said. “Is there anything you want to know, Squirt?”

“I don’t think so. If there was anything wrong, you’d already have told me, so I’ll take a peek at his chart later.”

“Okay,” she said, “and you mind the doctor’s orders, Dani.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

I kissed him, took the chair beside the bed, and looked around the room for the first time. The other bed was curtained off at the moment, so I lowered my voice. “How’s your roommate?”

“From the bits and pieces of conversation I’ve heard, he’s not doing quite as well as me. Apparently, he’s been kept totally sedated since they brought him into the room.”

“If he’s the other transplant patient, he just received a liver and a kidney—that’s pretty traumatic.”

“No kidding,” he said.

We talked for a while until it became obvious that he needed medication. “Babe,” I said, “why don’t you push that little button so you can really rest a bit?”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll do just that.”

“Okay, see you later.”

I kissed him again and left the room.

CHAPTER 38

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*Marco*

I LEFT the room and went to the nurse's station to take a look at Dani's chart. Dr. Rast's notes were at once concise and surprisingly legible, and I studied them with interest—things were looking good. Then I went down to the autopsy suite to talk to the pathologist, who was in the midst of examining the body of the donor.

"Dr. d'Argenzio," he said, "I'm glad you're here—you can tell me how our favorite patient is doing."

"He's doing very well," I said, "all things considered. There's something I need you to do before you sew this guy up."

"Certainly."

"I need you to remove a two-inch section of one of his ribs and preserve it for Dr. Rosati to run some tests on when he's back at work."

"I can do that," he said, "although it's an unusual request."

"All I know is that it's for some research that Dr. Rosati is conducting for *il Duca*."

"Consider it done," he said.

"Thank you."

Satisfied that there was nothing else I could or should do, I left the hospital and boarded a tram. When I got back to the apartment, I spent some quality time with the boys and told Lucia to see to her studies while I got them ready for bed. Immersing myself in these simple domestic acts somehow kept my mind from dwelling on the many things that could and probably would go wrong with an organ transplant. Around eight I called the hospital to speak to the head nurse in the ICU, who told me that Dani was asleep at the

moment and likely to remain so for the rest of the night. Armed with that information, I went to the gym and had a serious workout before I called it a night. The next morning I checked in on Dani after I made my rounds and was surprised to find him once again alert and cheerful.

“By all accounts, you’re progressing at an amazing pace,” I said.

“So they tell me.”

“What else do they tell you?”

“That I’ll be in my own room shortly after lunch,” he said.

“Better still.”

“Yeah.”

“Any mention of a discharge date?” I said.

“I tried and failed to get a commitment on that one, babe.”

“Better luck tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Don’t you have work to do?”

“What’s the matter?” I said. “Expecting a hot date to walk through that door?”

“Don’t be silly. I’m just saying that one of us ought to be back on schedule.”

I looked at my watch. “Actually, I’m expecting a patient in less than ten minutes, so I’ll head downstairs.”

“Give me a kiss first.”

“Only if you really want one.”

“Shut up and kiss me,” he said.

I complied with his request and went down to my office to deal with a steady stream of patients. After my last patient had come and gone, I went to see Dani in his private room. He was out cold, so I went home, had dinner, and took care of the boys. When I returned to the hospital later, he was awake, alert, and claimed to feel wonderful.

“Babe,” I said, “I’ll take your word for it, but I don’t see how you can possibly feel ‘wonderful’ after all you’ve been through.”

“Nevertheless...,” he said.

I stayed with him until his sleeping pill was delivered and held his hand until he succumbed. The next morning I paid him a quick visit before I made



my rounds.

“Aren’t you a little earlier than usual today?” he said.

“That’s very observant of you, and I am. I’ve got a heavy schedule today and wanted to get a running start.”

I really did have a heavy schedule, but I omitted any mention of what made it heavy—he would find that out soon enough.

“Well then,” he said, “you’d better get your ass in gear.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said, snapping him a mock salute.

I made my rounds as quickly as possible; then, still wearing my hospital attire, I went downstairs where Sal was waiting with a car.

“Good morning, Sal,” I said.

“Are you ready to go to the airport, Conte Marco? I am informed that the plane may be a bit early—something about favorable tailwinds over the Atlantic.”

“Absolutely.”

I got in the car, and Sal pointed it in the general direction of the airport. He was right—the plane was quite early. In fact, we arrived in the hangar just in time to greet the people exiting the plane. There were several passengers, and Mrs. Rosati and her daughter were among the last to climb down the steps. On her previous visit, I had noted that Mrs. Rosati was becoming a younger version of her mother. Like mother like daughter; Dani’s oldest sister was a younger but considerably thinner version of her mother, and even though I knew for sure that she was pushing forty, she didn’t show it.

“Good morning, Mrs. Rosati,” I said.

She took my proffered hand, saying, “Hello, Marco. I don’t believe you’ve met my oldest daughter, Sylvia Churchill. Sylvia, this is Marco d’Argenzio.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I said.

“Likewise,” she said in a rich contralto voice. “Has Dani told you that I’m the black sheep of the family?”

“No. Dani seems to think that he holds that position in perpetuity.”

“Well, I suppose it’s fair to say that I only held the title for a couple of years, until his sins trumped mine.”

“And what were yours, if I may ask?” I said.

“Well, to borrow a line from a movie, I ‘married an Aryan from Darien’.”

“That’s odd. You don’t sound like a girl with ‘braces on her brains’.”

“No, but I *am* raising my children in the heathen Lutheran Church, and that’s pretty serious, as sins are reckoned.”

“That’s one of my favorite movies,” I said, smiling.

“Sylvia,” Mrs. Rosati said sharply, “you promised to be good, and what are you two talking about?”

“Sorry, Mom,” Sylvia said. “Those are lines from a movie.”

“A movie?” Mrs. Rosati parroted. “What movie?”

“*Auntie Mame*,” I said.

“Oh,” Mrs. Rosati said.

We were interrupted before anything else could be said. “The ladies’ bags are loaded, Conte Marco,” Sal said.

“Great,” I said, “let’s get going.”

In the car, Sylvia asked, “Seriously, Marco, hasn’t Dani ever talked about me?”

“He doesn’t talk about his family at all. At least, he didn’t do so during all the years preceding the attack—I think the whole topic was just too painful. Since then he’s opened up a bit, but not much.”

“I hope we’re not going straight to the hospital,” Mrs. Rosati said.

“No, Ma’am. We’re going to our apartment in the castle, so you and your daughter can freshen up a bit. After that, we’ll go to the hospital.”

“How is he?”

“When I saw him early this morning, he was doing remarkably well, and claiming that he felt great.”

“You don’t sound convinced of that.”

“I’m not accusing him of making it up, but it’s most unusual for a transplant patient to bounce back so quickly.”

“I thought we’d be staying in your house on the mountain again,” she said.

“We don’t usually move up there until school is out—that makes it easier for the nanny to commute back and forth to her classes. As soon as the

boys are out of kindergarten for the summer, we'll make the move."

"Mom has told me so much about your house," Sylvia said, "that I was hoping to see it."

"That can be arranged. By the way, Mrs. Rosati, how is your mother?"

"She's fine, but my father isn't doing so well."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"At his age," Mrs. Rosati said, "nearly everything is serious, but he's expected to recover."

"Good. In front of us, you see the original medieval castle, which these days only serves as a tourist attraction. When we reach the other side of the castle you'll see the three newer buildings, which serve as residences and administrative offices. Behind those three buildings is a smaller building where my father lives. In the Duchy, the entire complex is collectively referred to as *il Castello*." In the years Dani and I had lived in Aragoni, I had made that speech dozens of times when escorting visitors to *il Castello*—it was almost a Pavlovian response when I approached it with first-time visitors in tow.

Sal pulled up to the elevator in the parking garage and unloaded the bags. Between us, we carried the bags upstairs, with my guests following. When we were inside the apartment, I said, "Thanks, Sal. We'll take care of it from here."

"Will you need me later?" he said.

"I don't think so. It's a nice day, and I'm going to show our visitors how to use the trams."

He nodded and left. Then I picked up one of the large bags and carried it to a guest room. "The owner of this bag can use this room," I said. Then I repeated the process with the other large bag. "I forgot to ask, were you able to sleep on the flight?"

"We both did," Mrs. Rosati said.

"Good. As soon as you're ready, we'll go to the hospital. I'll be in the den." I pointed at the open door.

While I waited for them, I settled down at my computer to catch up on e-mail and other things and totally lost track of the time, until Sylvia appeared in the den. "This really is a nice apartment," she said from the door, "and it's huge."

“Yes, it is. Shortly before the triplets were born, we moved up here from a smaller apartment, and the only thing we lack that we had downstairs is a terrace. We decided that having a terrace wouldn’t be a good idea when the boys started to walk. Besides which, we’re only in residence here during the cold months. We have several terraces at our house.”

“Yeah. Mom was quite taken with your house. How is Dani, really?”

“He is as I said. I don’t make a habit of whitewashing things. His rate of recovery is truly astounding.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have implied that you were holding things back.”

“It was a reasonable assumption on your part. Anyhow, ask your brother and he’ll tell you that I always say precisely what’s on my mind.”

“That’s good, because so do I.”

“So do you what?” her mother said from the door.

“Always speak my mind,” Sylvia said.

“You can say that again.”

“Are we ready to go to the hospital?” I said.

Heads nodded. “Good. First, I need to give each of you a key.”

I handed them their keys. “This looks like a credit card,” Sylvia said.

“Yes, it does. Swipe that card in the elevator and you will be allowed up to this floor. Swipe it in the door and the door opens. When we get to the tram, you’ll see that it also gets you transport around the system. It will automatically expire in two weeks, but if you decide to extend your visit, it can be updated.”

“I’m surprised you’re going around without security,” Mrs. Rosati said.

“Two years ago I wouldn’t have, but our security people believe the threat has been virtually eliminated. That doesn’t mean that we’re not careful, however. It really feels good not having to call security every time we want to go somewhere.”

When we got to the elevator, I showed them how to swipe their cards and enter the code in the keypad. At the tram stop, I showed them the map of the system that was posted on the wall. “Think of this as being no different than using the subway in Boston,” I said. “At least two of the trams make a continuous loop of the city, and we want one of those. Look for a car that says *l’Ospedale* on the front. If it’s going toward the parking lot, your trip will be

shorter—if it's going in the other direction, you'll have to make an almost-complete loop of the city before you reach your stop, which, by the way, is clearly marked."

When our tram approached, Sylvia said, "It reminds me of the Green Line."

"It does, doesn't it?" I said.

The ride to the hospital didn't take long, and I ushered my guests upstairs to Dani's room. "You have visitors," I said when I walked through the door.

"Who?" he said.

"See for yourself, they're right behind me."

"Mom, Sylvia. Wow, this is a surprise."

"I'm going down to my office for a bit," I said, "but I'll be back at noon to take you ladies to lunch."

"Thanks, Marco," Sylvia said. "We'll be right here."

I was back in Dani's room promptly at noon. "Anyone ready for lunch?" I said.

"I am," Dani said.

"Sorry, babe, but you can't go with us."

"Then I certainly deserve a consolation prize."

"What?" I said.

"You didn't kiss me when you got here."

I went to the side of his bed opposite the visitors and took care of that oversight. "That's better," he said. "Where are you going for lunch?"

"Take three guesses and the first two don't count."

"Poco."

"Bingo."

"Marco," he said, "Mom and Sylvia are suffering from jetlag, so I hope you'll take them back home for a nap after lunch. You can bring them back after dinner."

"If that's what they want, I'll be happy to comply."

"It's not what they want," he said. "It's what they need."

“Yeah. Ready, ladies?”

When we were seated at the restaurant, Mrs. Rosati said, “This is where the Lanes took Mom and me to lunch, and we all had dinner here a few days later.”

“Yes, Ma’am. It’s one of our favorite places.”

After lunch we walked back to the plaza in front of the central train station to catch our tram. As we walked through the old quarter, Sylvia said, “This looks like a neat place to shop for souvenirs and things.”

“Absolutely,” I said, “and I hope you’ll take advantage of it while you’re here. I’ll be around tomorrow and Sunday, but starting Monday I have to begin keeping regular office hours—we’re one doctor short right now, and I can’t justify taking too much time off.”

“I think by then we’ll be able to find our way around,” she said. “Can you recommend a good guidebook?”

“I can do better than that. There are a couple of them in our den.”

When we got back to the apartment, Mrs. Rosati was yawning. “I don’t know about you, Sylvia,” she said, “but I’m going to take a nap.”

“Actually, I’m kind of wired right now,” Sylvia said.

“How about a visit to the baths?” I said. “It can be very relaxing.”

“That sounds good.”

“Sylvia!” Mrs. Rosati said. “I’ve heard about those baths, and they’re like a nudist place—you know, men and women naked together.”

“So?” Sylvia said.

“Is that all you can say?”

“Mom, as I’ve told you more than once, Mickey and I spend a long weekend at a nudist resort a couple of times every year.”

“Yeah, you have, but you say so many things just to yank my chain, I never took it seriously.”

“Well, believe it,” Sylvia said, “I’m no stranger to nudity in mixed company. Shall we go, Marco?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “We’ll be back in an hour or so, Mrs. Rosati.”

“Whatever.”

In the elevator, I said, “You like to shock your mom, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

We were standing in the entrance to the baths, looking at them. “Wow,” she said, “you weren’t kidding, were you?”

“Not at all. Directly ahead of you are the three pools. The first one is the *calidarium*, the next pool is the *tepidarium*, and the last one is the *frigidarium*. The louvered doors are the dressing rooms, and the four doors over there are the massage rooms. There are two male and two female massage practitioners. Shall we have a go at it?”

“Absolutely.”

We selected adjacent dressing rooms, and I undressed quickly, donned a terrycloth robe, and waited outside for her to join me. When she emerged wearing her robe and shower shoes, she said, “Lead on.”

I led her over to the *calidarium*, tossed my robe on a nearby chair, and sank gratefully into the not-quite-hot water. She quickly joined me.

After a few minutes, she said, “All this lacks are a few Jacuzzi jets.”

“Yeah. You weren’t kidding about going to nudist resorts, were you?” I said.

“Not at all. We go to a resort for families, and the kids love it.”

“Your mother would frown on that, I think.”

“No kidding?” she said. “It’s a miracle one of them hasn’t let it slip when they see her.”

“I couldn’t help noticing that you’re a ‘smoothie’.”

“It seems to be the norm in this place.”

“That’s because Aragoni was first settled by people from Rome, and they brought their culture with them.”

“How does the massage thing work?” she said.

“If you want a massage by a man, watch for a green light to go on above one of the male doors, ditto for a massage by a woman.”

“What does it cost?”

“For visitors, nothing. Just give the massage person your keycard and tell them which apartment you’re in.”

“And it’s free?”

“Well, residents are charged a nominal amount, which is subsidized by

the Council. These are the private baths. The public baths, which are open to tourists and everyone who can afford them, pretty much subsidize the private baths.”

“You grew up in the States, didn’t you?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Do you miss them?”

“I can honestly say ‘no’. For all the years that Dani and I were in school, we were too poor, or at least too thrifty, to take advantage of most of the things that were available to us, and in any case, we never had the time. Here, we can take the train down to Milan and attend a performance at La Scala, or we can spend a weekend in Paris, or Rome, or... you name it.”

“Tell me about your life together,” she said.

I spent the next half-hour or so talking about how Dani and I met, lived, and loved, up until the time we moved to Aragoni.

“Damn,” she said, “my parents have missed out on so much of my brother’s life, and all because of their church.”

“Yeah, but what can you do?” I said.

“Nothing at all. Mom’s eyes got a little big when you kissed him.”

“It’s not the first time she’s seen me do it, but I suppose it’ll take years for her to adjust.”

“That’s for sure.”

“We issued an invitation to all of you to come here in the winter for the skiing,” I said.

“Really? I never got it.”

“I guess your mother didn’t bother to pass it along.”

“Yeah. Before this trip came up, she and I weren’t exactly chummy. I’m ready to move to the next cooler pool.”

“Me too.”

We took advantage of the massage services before we left the baths. Sylvia selected a masseuse, and I was grateful to find Andreas free. “Who is the beautiful woman with you, Marco?” he asked.

“Dani’s older sister. When did you see us?”

“I took a break and visited the *calidarium* while you were in the



*frigidarium*. She is American, yes?”

“Yes,” I said.

“American females in general don’t like nudity in mixed company.”

“She told me that she and her husband visit nudist resorts regularly.”

“That would explain it. How is Dani?”

“Doing remarkably well.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Is his mother here?” he said.

“Oh, yes.”

“Is she any friendlier that she was before?”

“A little bit, I think.”

“Good.”

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CHAPTER 39

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*Marco*

WHEN Sylvia and I finally returned to the apartment, Mrs. Rosati was sitting in the kitchen drinking a cup of tea.

"I thought you two had eloped or something," she said.

"Hardly that, Mom," Sylvia said. "Marco and I had a nice long soak in each of the pools, followed by a massage. It was wonderful, and I'm as relaxed as I've been in a long time."

"I'll have to admit," Mrs. Rosati said, "you do look relaxed."

"I'll take you down to the baths tomorrow and you can have a massage."

"I don't think so."

"Your loss," Sylvia said.

"Marco," Mrs. Rosati said, clearly anxious to change the subject, "I was thinking about cooking dinner later, so I looked in your pantry. You boys don't keep a lot of food on hand, do you?"

"Not a lot," I said. "When we're in residence here, Dani and I have a good lunch either in the hospital café or somewhere nearby, and eat very lightly in the evening. Then there is the fact that we're gone at least two weekends every month. Most of what's on hand is for the boys and Lucia."

"I saw two or three very interesting food stores in the old quarter when I was here before but never got a chance to visit them—in fact, I spotted one of them today. If you'll take me there, I'll stock up on a few things so I can cook some Italian meals."

"You're a guest, you don't have to do that."

“Of course I don’t, but I’m going to, okay?” she said.

Sylvia laughed at that and said, “You might as well capitulate, Marco.... When she gets *that* tone in her voice, there’s no stopping her.”

“I surrender. After we visit the hospital in the morning, we’ll stop by the old quarter and you can shop to your heart’s content.”

I heard the door to the apartment open, followed by childish voices. “Don’t look now,” I said, “but we’re being invaded.”

The boys heard my voice and ran into the kitchen, only to skid to a halt when they saw the two strangers. “Hi, gang,” I said. “Come give me a hug.”

They clustered around my chair, doing just that. Then I said, “Guys, this is Papa Dani’s mother, Mrs. Rosati. Don’t you remember her?”

Heads were shaken in the negative. “Well, it was a couple of years ago and you were only three. And this lady is Papa Dani’s sister, Mrs. Churchill. Ladies, these noisy little fellows are Marcus, Bernardo, and Giovanni. And this is their nanny, my cousin Lucia.”

Without missing a beat, Bernardo said, “You said we could go to the hospital and see Papa Dani.”

“I sure did. Ladies, are you up to helping me escort these three to the hospital for a short visit?”

“Marco,” Mrs. Rosati said, “when the day comes that I can’t handle three five-year-olds, it’ll be time to take to my bed permanently.”

“Ditto that,” Sylvia said.

“Okay, guys,” I said. “Why don’t you ask Lucia to pick out some clean clothes for you to wear?”

The boys hurried from the kitchen, followed closely by Lucia.

“Marco,” Sylvia said, “they’re adorable.”

“And,” Mrs. Rosati said, “they’re getting so big.”

Thirty minutes later we boarded a tram for the hospital. Sal was with us, and the boys were all over him—he was one of their favorite adult playmates, and we’d been glad when their fascination with the shoulder holster under his coat had finally worn off. I called the hospital while we were on the tram, and there were three masks waiting for us at the nurse’s station.

“Why the masks?” Sylvia said.

“Because kids bring all sorts of bugs home from kindergarten,” I said,

“and the drugs Dani takes to suppress rejection of the new kidney also lower his resistance to infection.”

“I can relate to that,” she said. “My kids were almost never sick until they started in day care and then kindergarten.”

“Okay, guys,” I said to the boys, “remember you promised to be quiet.”

They all said, “Yes, Sir,” and we led them into Dani’s room.

“Whoa!” Dani said when we all crowded into his room, “I’m being invaded. Hello, Sal.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay, guys, I’ll lift you up one at a time, so you can give Papa Dani a hug.”

When that was over, I said, “How’s the patient?”

“Feeling great. Ready to go home.”

“What’s the doctor say?” I said.

“Maybe Sunday afternoon.”

“That’s good news.”

Being five, the boys’ enthusiasm at being in the hospital room didn’t last very long, so finally, I said, “Sylvia, if Sal and I take the boys back to the castle, do you think you and your mother can find your way back?”

“Why not?” she said. “The tram is about as simple as it gets.”

“Okay. Come on, guys, Uncle Sal and I are gonna take you home.”

I bent over the bed and kissed Dani. “I’ll see you later, champ.”

“Tonight?”

“If our guests are as jetlagged as they should be, they’ll probably retire early. I’ll be back.”

“I’ll hold you to that promise.”

“Okay, boys,” I said, “let’s go.”

In the corridor, I removed the boys’ masks and dropped them in a waste receptacle; then we went down to the tram stop. “Dani’s sister is a good-looking woman,” Sal said.

“True, but she’s way too old for you; besides which, she’s married.”

“She can’t be that old,” he said.

“She’s at least forty. I think her oldest son is already in college. Wait a

minute, you have a girlfriend, don't you?"

"Not anymore."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. When I was recovering from the surgery on my shoulder, she got entirely too possessive, so I moved on. Actually, I'm dating a couple of women at the moment."

"You don't want to get married, do you?"

"Not really. In a way, I'm sort of like Andreas—except I like women and he likes men."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out," I said, "and more power to you."

When I ushered the boys through the door of the apartment, I said, "Thanks, Sal. Can I offer you a drink?"

"I'd like to, Marco, but I've got a dinner date."

"Have a great evening, then, and I hope you get lucky."

"Thank you," he said.

I closed the door and went in search of the boys. They were in the kitchen excitedly telling Lucia about their adventure while she prepared their dinner. "Go wash up, guys," I said, "and your food will be ready by the time you get back to the kitchen."

They scampered off in the direction of their room, and I wondered for the thousandth time why little boys were always in such a hurry.

"How is Dani?" Lucia said.

"He says he feels wonderful and might be allowed to come home by Sunday."

"That's good news."

"Yes, it is. I've been thinking—maybe it's time to move to the house on the mountain. We're well past the last snow, and the boys love it up there."

"Good," she said.

"You won't mind driving to school every day?" I said.

"Not at all. I'll be graduating soon anyway."

"Are you still thinking about graduate school?" I said.

"I've pretty much changed my mind about that. In fact, Mrs. McClanahan has offered me a position in the pediatric department at the hospital."

"That's wonderful. We'll all miss you, but that's great."

"Have you found someone else for the boys?"

"Truthfully," I said, "we haven't even started looking."

"Can I stay on for a while, so I can save enough money to furnish an apartment?"

"Of course you can. That's the best news yet. In fact, as far as Dani and I are concerned, you can stay as long as you like—right up to the time the boys go off to boarding school."

She laughed at that and said, "Well, Cousin Marco, I don't think it'll take me that long to be ready to move into my own apartment, but thank you."

"I just had a flash—is there a budding romance going on somewhere?" I said.

"I wouldn't call it a romance, but there is a nice young man that I pretty much date exclusively right now."

"Good. Everyone needs a social life."

"We're ready to eat," a small voice said from behind me.

"Then I guess you'd better sit down at the table," I said.

Lucia and I supervised the kids' dinner; then I took them into their bathroom and handled the bathing chore, which involved a certain amount of playtime in their large bathtub. While I was overseeing their dressing for bed, my cell phone rang.

"They're on the way," Dani said.

"Good. Are they planning to come back tonight?"

"You called it—they're gonna make an early night of it."

"Good. I'll be there as soon as I get them fed, and I have news."

"What news?" he said.

"Stick around and I'll tell you when I see you."

"What am I gonna do? Disconnect all this shit and leave, carrying my pee bag with me?"

"That's right, they're still measuring the output from your kidneys."

“Input and output, babe. Every glass of liquid I drink is measured—you know the drill.”

“Yeah. See you soon. Bye.”

“Bye,” he said.

I went to the den and settled down at the computer while I waited for my guests to arrive, which didn’t happen for nearly an hour. When the two women walked into the apartment, they were having a heated discussion—which they cut short the minute I appeared in the living room.

“Dani called to tell me you were on the way,” I said. “What happened—did you get lost?”

“No,” Sylvia said, “Mom insisted that we take the tram going in the wrong direction, so it took a while.”

“You’re not gonna let me live that down, are you?” Mrs. Rosati said.

“Not for a while.”

“Are you ready to eat?” I said.

“Yeah, but not if we have to go anywhere,” Sylvia said.

“Not to worry, there’s a restaurant in the castle complex that delivers around the clock. I put the menus on the coffee table earlier.”

“Give me a minute to use the facilities,” Mrs. Rosati said.

“Me too,” Sylvia said.

Later, when they were perusing the menus, Sylvia said, “This is like the guest menu in a private club.”

“How’s that?” her mother said.

“No prices.”

“Oh. Then how do we know what things are going to cost us?”

“That’s the point,” I said. “You don’t need to know. Guests don’t pay. Just order whatever you like—the prices are reasonable, I assure you.”

She gave me a long look and, satisfied that I at least appeared to be telling the truth, returned her attention to the menu. Eventually they made their selections, and I telephoned the order in to the restaurant.

“Food will be here in about thirty minutes,” I said. “And before I forget it, don’t unpack. Dani seems to think he’s going home Sunday, and I’m going to get us moved into the house up on the mountain tomorrow.”

“Cool,” Sylvia said.

“It’s certainly a nicer location, but you won’t be able to hop on a tram and go into the city at the drop of a hat. I’ll have a car available, however.”

“How far is it to your house?” Sylvia said.

“As the crow flies, about five miles, but if the crow has to drive a car, it’s more like fifteen.”

“Excuse me, Cousin Marco,” Lucia said from the other side of the room. “The boys would like you to come tuck them in.”

“I’ll be right there. Ladies, when the food arrives, all you have to do is sign for it—no tipping is allowed or expected.”

I went into the boys’ room and got them settled down for the night and returned to the living room just in time to answer the door and direct that the food be laid out on the kitchen table.

“This is really good,” Sylvia said as she dug into her entree.

“I agree,” Mrs. Rosati said.

“That’s the problem,” I said, “it’s so good and so reasonably priced that we get spoiled.”

“How many people live and work in this complex of buildings?” Sylvia said.

“I don’t really know, but there are enough residents, along with workers in the administrative offices, to keep the kitchen open around the clock. Because we have business interests in other parts of the world in different time zones, the offices are staffed by three daily shifts—in other words, there’s no lack of customers for the restaurant, and it’s a captive audience.”

When we finished eating, they announced their intention to call it a night, and I headed for the hospital. When I got there I walked into Dani’s room, closed the door behind me, and went to stand beside the bed. “Alone at last,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“How are you?” I said.

“Tired of lying around doing nothing.”

I kissed him thoroughly for a few minutes. When we broke the kiss, he said, “You mentioned news?”

“Gert has offered Lucia a job in the pediatrics department, so she’s not



going to go for an advanced degree.”

“And?” he said.

“And she wants to stay on with us for an unspecified amount of time so she can save enough money to furnish an apartment.”

“Good—that saves us from having to look for a replacement for a while.”

“Yeah, too bad it won’t take her six or seven years to save the money.”

“Count your blessings,” he said.

“True. Oh, I almost forgot, if you come home Sunday it’ll be to the house on the mountain. I’m moving us up there tomorrow.”

“That’s great, and I know Sylvia is looking forward to it.”

“She tell you that she went to the baths with me?” I said.

“No kidding?”

“Yeah, it seems that she and Mickey go to nudist resorts regularly, and they take the kids with them. Needless to say, your mother doesn’t know that part of it.”

“But she knows they’re nudists?”

“Well, when she told me about it, your mom was present and acted surprised, so Sylvia reminded her that she had been told about it.”

“But she always thought Sylvia was yanking her chain, right?” he said.

“I believe those were her exact words. I like your sister, babe, she’s okay by me.”

“She likes you, too—in fact, she said so,” he said.

“Yeah, too bad....”

“I know, but after that confrontation with Mom and Dad all those years ago, I cut every one of them out of my life except for an occasional ‘accidental’ encounter with Grandma in the North End. It was less painful that way.”

“Yeah, sorry I mentioned it.”

“You didn’t mention it, I read your mind.”

“By the way, she also made use of the massage services.”

“Good for her,” he said. “You know, I’ve always wondered, do the

females get a ‘full service’ massage like we do?”

“I asked Andreas about that once, and he said no, unless an extremely knowledgeable female expressly requests it. There’s a sort of code word for it, but I forget what it is.”

“I wish you could crawl into this bed with me right now,” he said.

“Yeah, me too. But even if I did, it would be a bit awkward, what with the catheter and all.”

“No shit? I’ll be glad when they remove that thing, but I’m not looking forward to the experience.”

I sat by his bed, holding his hand and talking for a couple of hours—until I saw that he was beginning to get tired. “Babe,” I said, “you’re sinking, so I need to go.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“No guessing about it. You need your rest, period. I’ll be back in the morning with your other visitors.”

“Okay. I love you,” he said.

“Yeah, I know you do, and I love you too.”

“I guess that means we’re stuck with each other, huh?”

“Yep.”

I gave him a lengthy kiss, went home and straight to bed.

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CHAPTER 40

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*Marco*

SATURDAY morning, my guests and I stepped from the elevator into the parking garage, and I said, “I called downstairs last night and reserved a car.”

“Reserved a car?” Sylvia parroted.

“A number of cars are kept available for rental by family members when needed.”

They followed me over to the guard booth, where one of the two uniformed men on duty said, “Good morning, Conte Marco,” and handed me a clipboard. I signed the document it contained, and he gave me a key attached to a clicker.

I looked at the small tag on the key, read it, and said, “We’re in space number twenty, ladies.”

When we were underway, Sylvia said, “Wouldn’t it be cheaper for you and Dani to own a car?”

“Not really. During the winter, we rarely drive anywhere. You grew up in Boston, so you should know that a car can be a liability at times.”

“That’s true,” she said.

“It’s not that bad here, but we just don’t have the need. Have you ever been to Montreal?”

“Several times.”

“Then you know about all those underground passageways lined with shops,” I said.

“Of course,” she said.

“We have underground passageways here, but without the shops.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. If we don’t want to go out into bitter cold weather, we go underground to get to work.”

“Isn’t that a long walk?” she said.

“Yes, it is, so we use electric golf carts.”

“Clever.”

“If you’ve got the tunnels,” Mrs. Rosati said, “why not have a subway system?”

“We don’t have a large enough population to support an actual subway system, and the tunnels would have to be several times as big.”

Dani wasn’t in his room when we got there, so I went down to the nurse’s station to inquire. “He’s downstairs in imaging,” I said when I returned to Dani’s room.

“Is something wrong?” Mrs. Rosati said.

“Not at all—it’s just a routine thing. He’ll be back shortly. If you’ll excuse me, I haven’t made my rounds this morning and I have three patients to see.”

When I returned from those visits, Dani was back in his room sitting in a comfortable chair. “You’re up and about I see. That’s a good sign.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the latest word?” I said.

“Didn’t you look at my chart?”

“Not this morning.”

“Well then—the latest word is I’m out of here in the morning.”

“That *is* good news,” I said.

“Yeah.”

After thirty minutes of conversation, Mrs. Rosati said, “Can we go shopping now?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Shopping?” Dani parroted.

“Dani,” his mother said, “I looked in your pantry to see if there was anything that I could cook....”

“And there wasn’t, right?”

“Not even close. By the way, Marco, when I was here before, you had a cook at your house. I hope you don’t have one now.”

“No, Ma’am. We had a cook then, because it was a special occasion and I was expecting an unusually large number of guests. When it’s just us, Lucia, and the boys, we cook for ourselves.”

“Good.”

“Before we go to those shops in the old quarter, would you like to go up to the house and have a quick look at what’s already on hand?”

“Yes, thank you, I would.”

“Let’s go, then.”

When we arrived at the house, we left Mrs. Rosati in the kitchen, and I took Sylvia out onto the terrace. “My children and their friends use the word awesome so often that it has almost become meaningless,” she said, “but this is truly awesome.”

“If you like this,” I said, “you’ll love the terrace outside your bedroom door.”

“Show me,” she said.

I took her upstairs and showed her the bedrooms, starting with the master suite. When she saw the guest room that would be hers, she walked out onto the terrace and settled down on a chaise lounge. “Give me a book and a glass of wine,” she said, “and I may never leave.”

“Dani and I feel the same way when we’re up here. As much as we enjoy our work, I think we’ll really enjoy retiring to this house eventually.”

“Do you use the house in the winter?” she said.

“Not often. Even though the roads are salted and plowed, navigating all of those curves and grades isn’t a lot of fun.”

“I suppose not. Much as I hate to leave this spot, I guess we’d better see what Mom’s up to in the kitchen. You don’t mind her sort of taking over in that department, do you?”

“Not at all. Dani and I are both competent cooks, but we prefer to keep it simple and spend our time in other ways.”

“I can relate to that—somehow I failed to inherit the gene that compels me to spend my life in the kitchen.”

When we arrived in the kitchen, Mrs. Rosati was examining the yellow pad I had given her; I could see that it was filled with her notes.

"Mom," Sylvia said, "are you ready to go shopping?"

"I think so. Marco, I can't find any wine in the kitchen, cooking or otherwise."

"That's because it's all in the wine cellar," I said. "Follow me."

I led them down to the basement, unlocked the door to the wine cellar, and turned on the lights in the room behind it.

"I think you'll find anything you could possibly need in here."

"My goodness," she said as she surveyed the room.

"There's a small ledger on that shelf," I said, pointing, "which contains an inventory of what's here. Are you looking specifically for cooking wines?"

"Yes."

"Then we'd better add them to your shopping list. Most of the wine down here is a little too expensive to be used as cooking wine. Do you remember Dani telling you about finding that forgotten wine cellar in il Castello di Conti?"

"Yes, now that you mention it," she said.

"That's what gave him the idea for this cellar. He and I have always liked fine wines, but while we were in school, we couldn't afford them. When we built this house, he created this cellar and started it with a few cases of wine from the cellar in Conti."

"Is there any of it left?" she said.

"Not in Conti. That cellar was a treasure trove of wine, and there were even some bottles of brandy dating back to the early nineteenth century. Most of it was sold to a couple of wine dealers in Rome, and the proceeds were used to renovate the castle so it could be opened for tours. We still have a few bottles of Bordeaux and Burgundy, but they're so valuable we save them for extremely special occasions."

"How valuable," Sylvia said, "if you don't mind my asking?"

"Some of them would fetch well over two thousand dollars a bottle in New York City," I said.

"Wow!"

"Yeah. My grandmother says that the last Conte to be interested in wine

was my great-grandfather. From the look of that cellar, he collected wine for the sake of collecting. Dani found dozens of unopened cases of Burgundy and Bordeaux going back to the forties and fifties. They had been carefully stored, and the temperature and humidity in that subcellar were ideal.”

“And none of it went to waste?” Mrs. Rosati said.

“Actually, there were several thousand bottles of Italian wine which were undrinkable—very few Italian varieties age well. So Dani came up with the bright idea of selling them in the castle gift shop, and tourists happily plunk down ten euros for a bottle of thirty-year-old Italian wine with a fancy label on the back stating that it is from the wine cellar of il Castello di Conti and probably not drinkable.”

“Tourists will buy anything, won’t they?” Sylvia said.

“That’s what your brother said when he talked us into doing it.”

“Us?” she said.

“I hired a cousin of mine to be managing director of the Conti Group. He has an apartment in the castle and oversees all the various Conti enterprises.”

“I’m ready to go shopping,” Mrs. Rosati said, clearly bored with the conversation.

“After you, ladies,” I said.

In the car, Mrs. Rosati said, “That house was very clean for a place that’s been vacant all winter.”

“We have it cleaned once a month during the winter,” I said, “and that includes opening a number of windows and airing it thoroughly.”

“It shows.”

“You remember meeting Mrs. McClanahan, don’t you?” I said.

“The head nurse who moved here from Boston?”

“Yes.”

“I liked her. Why?”

“That’s her house coming up on the right and above the road.”

“She must have a wonderful view,” Sylvia said, “perched on the edge of the mountain like that.”

“She does indeed. Dani and I considered purchasing that lot, or another one with a view, but we decided that the waterfall trumped the view.”

“No argument there,” she said.

The principal shopping street in the old quarter was for pedestrians only, but I was able to find a parking spot only a block away. “Mrs. Rosati,” I asked, “are you planning to purchase any perishable items?”

“Only produce, why?”

“If you were going to purchase frozen items, I would suggest that we have lunch first.”

“If there is as much fresh produce available as I saw two years ago, that won’t be necessary, but what about milk for the boys?”

“We’ll bring it from the apartment along with the boys and pick up more along the way if needed.”

“Good.”

By the time Mrs. Rosati had visited three small grocery stores, Sylvia and I were loaded down with shopping bags, and she was trying to get her mother to quit buying. “Mom,” she said, “we won’t be here long enough for you to use up all this stuff.”

“Maybe,” Mrs. Rosati said, “but I’m sure the boys won’t let it go to waste.”

“No, Ma’am,” I said. “It definitely won’t go to waste. Why don’t Sylvia and I carry this stuff to the car?”

“You do that. I’ll be in that little wine shop over there.”

I looked in the direction she was pointing. “It’s a nice shop, and the man who owns and runs it is sort of dating our Gert.”

“Who’s Gert?” Sylvia said.

“Mrs. McClanahan, the nursing supervisor. She calls me Squirt and I call her Gert.”

“Let’s carry this stuff to the car,” she said.

“Right behind you.”

We carried the shopping bags to the car and returned to where we had left Mrs. Rosati. In the wine shop we found her chatting amiably with the proprietor. “Good morning, Conte Marco,” he said the minute he spotted me—Gert had finally told her friend who I really was.

“Good morning,” I said. “Did you have what Mrs. Rosati needed?”

“He certainly did,” she said.



“Good. Are you ready for lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “Poco is just around the corner.”

“Oh, I love that restaurant.”

I chatted with the proprietor for a minute and answered his polite questions about Dani’s progress. Then I led my charges to the restaurant, and we settled down at one of their outside tables to enjoy the wonderful day. After lunch we returned to the car and went back to the house.

“That was probably the best lunch I’ve had in a restaurant in a very long time,” Sylvia said.

“I agree,” Mrs. Rosati said. “Wait ’til you have dinner there. I think their tiramisu might even be better than mine.”

“No way,” her daughter said, and they both laughed.

After we unloaded the car and carried the groceries into the kitchen, Mrs. Rosati shooed us out. “Why don’t you go back to the castle and take care of moving the boys,” she said. “I packed my suitcase and overnight case this morning, so they’re ready to go.”

“Will you be all right by yourself, Mom?” Sylvia said.

“Of course I will, and unless I’m mistaken, there’s a security guy lurking about somewhere.”

“Yes,” I said, “there is a security guy. He has an apartment above the garage, and he walks the grounds every so often.”

“That’s what I thought; now go, both of you, and let me get organized.”

We went. When we got to the apartment, I was glad that I had given Lucia a heads-up before we went to the hospital—she had the boys’ gear neatly packed and waiting just inside the door. They were still growing so fast that we weren’t able to keep a permanent wardrobe for them in both the castle and the house, so there were a lot of clothes to be carried down to the car. While I made several trips doing that, Sylvia carried the suitcases and other belongings to the car.

“I’m glad you got an SUV for this gig,” she said as she stowed the last suitcase.

“I’ve always tried to observe the Boy Scout Motto.”

“Yeah, I know, ‘be prepared’.”

“Exactly.”

It took one more trip to carry Dani’s and my laptops and the perishables from the refrigerator along with various boxes of cereal and kiddie items that were open and in use. Then we three adults herded the boys down to the car, and we were off, with Lucia following in her little car. At the house, the resident security man offered to help when he saw the mountain of items being unloaded from the car. With his help, we got things into the house fairly quickly—stowing them away would, however, take a while. After he left, Sylvia and I went into the kitchen to see how things were progressing.

“Good grief, Mom,” she said. “You got everything put away already?”

“It’s what I do,” Mrs. Rosati said. “I hope you don’t mind that I rearranged things a bit, Marco?”

“Not really. Besides, if we really don’t like it, Dani and I can change it after you leave.” I laughed in an attempt to indicate that I didn’t really mean it.

“I think,” Sylvia said, “that we should go visit Dani before you do any serious cooking.”

“That’s a good idea,” her mother said, “because I’m planning something for dinner that takes quite a bit of time to prepare.”

Two hours later, after a visit with Dani, we were back at the house. The minute she walked through the door, Mrs. Rosati went to the kitchen and put on an apron—one of her many purchases. “You young people go on about your business,” she said.

“You heard her,” Sylvia said, “and I can tell you from painful experience that she wants us to stay out.”

“Lucia may need to get some snacks for the boys,” I said.

“As long as she doesn’t get in my way,” Mrs. Rosati said, “that’s fine.”

Three hours later, we had a memorable meal; I had found a couple of very good bottles of Chianti in the wine cellar, which we polished off along with our food. I had invited—at the chef’s request—the security man to join us, and he was beside himself in praise of the food, telling Mrs. Rosati that it reminded him of his grandmother’s cooking.

“I hope you don’t want to go back to the hospital this evening,” I said. “I’m much too comfortable to drive, and I’ve had way too much wine.”

“We’ll see Dani when you bring him home tomorrow morning,” Mrs. Rosati said. “Would you like some more tiramisu?”

“Not now, but perhaps in a couple of hours?”

“Perfect,” she said

Sylvia and I offered to help her clean up the kitchen, but Mrs. Rosati said, “Sylvia, you know very well that I clean as I go.”

“Then we’ll do the dishes,” Sylvia said.

“You can load the dishwasher if you like.”

I went upstairs, out onto the terrace off the master suite, and called Dani. “It’s only me,” I said when he answered his phone.

“I figured you’d call about now,” he said.

“You did?”

“Marco, Mom told me she was gonna cook dinner, so let me guess—you’re too comfortably full of good food and wine to drive down here, right?”

“Pretty much,” I said.

“Besides, you’re gonna be here bright and early, with emphasis on early, right?”

“Count on it,” I said. “I want to have a brief chat with your doctor, so I’ll be there before he makes his rounds.”

“What’s that sound I hear? Oh, you’re out on the terrace, aren’t you?”

“Yep. It’s getting a little chilly, but I’m much too comfortable to move. You sound as though you’re very much on the mend.”

“That I am, and my doctor is totally amazed at the speed with which I’ve recovered. I think he would have let me come home yesterday, but he simply couldn’t believe what he was seeing in terms of test results—which is why he ran a bunch more of them this morning.”

“Be glad that he’s being thorough.”

“I’m glad,” he said, “but I also want to come home.”

“In the morning, babe, in the morning.”

We talked a bit longer, then ended the call.

## CHAPTER 41

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### *Marco*

I WAS at the hospital much earlier than necessary Sunday morning, because I didn't want to miss an opportunity to talk to Dani's doctor. When he entered the room, Dani and I had spent nearly an hour mostly talking about a proposed trip to Paris to see Joel and Claire.

"Good morning, Doctors," Dani's doctor said, "how are you?"

"I'm fine," I said, "and your patient seems to think that he's more than fine."

"He is that," the doctor said. "He shouldn't be, at least not at this stage of the game, but he is. I've never seen anyone bounce back from a transplant so quickly."

"Does that mean I can go home?" Dani said.

"That's what it means. I see from your chart that they removed the catheter last night."

"They did, and I can't tell you how much fun that was."

"Let me check you over," the doctor said, ignoring Dani's jibe, "and I'll sign off on the discharge."

A few minutes later he pronounced himself satisfied and left the room.

"Did you bring me some clothes?" Dani said.

"No. I brought your robe yesterday, remember?"

"I wanted clothes," he said.

"When you're home and after you've had a shower."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

When the orderly arrived with the wheelchair, Dani was sitting in the most comfortable chair in the room wearing his robe and slippers. Thirty minutes later I pulled up to the side entrance of our house. Someone must have been watching the driveway, because Sylvia and Mrs. Rosati were hovering inside the door the minute I opened it. Mrs. Rosati started to fuss over Dani, but he stopped her.

“Mom, we played this scene two years ago. Right now, what I need most is a shower and a proper shave, okay?”

She relented, and we climbed the stairs, but not nearly as slowly as I had thought we would. “You weren’t kidding about feeling good, were you?” I said.

“Not at all.”

Thirty minutes later, the shower, shave, and other important business taken care of, I went in search of our guests, who were out on the terrace. “How is he?” Sylvia said.

“Kind of ticked off at me right now,” I said.

“Why?”

“I told him that if he tried to come downstairs before lunch I’d sedate him.”

“Good for you,” she said. “May we go see him?”

“At your leisure. He was in bed when I left the master suite, but knowing him, he’s probably out on the terrace by now.”

As they left the terrace, Lucia and the boys appeared, so I settled down to play with them for a while. While I was thus occupied, Sylvia and her mother came back onto the terrace.

“Is everything all right?” I said.

“Yeah,” Sylvia said. “He was on the terrace, and after a bit he started to get sleepy, so we left.”

“Aren’t you worried about those three boys falling into the stream?” Mrs. Rosati said, pointing to the waterfall and stream.

“We were very concerned, so we installed safeguards. For example, there’s a low fence where the pool at the base of the largest waterfall flows into the stream, and a much higher one somewhat farther downstream at the edge of our property; by the way, the stream is quite shallow. In addition, there’s a fence hidden behind the shrubbery at the edge of the yard. Add to

that the fact that all three of them swim like fish, and Dani and I have threatened them with absolutely dire consequences if they fail to keep within bounds.”

“Well,” she said, “they are rather well-behaved for little boys.”

“Most of the time,” I said.

“Are they allowed to get into the pool at the base of the waterfall?” Sylvia said.

“Only with one or both of us present, but they’ve only asked to do that once. That water is pure snowmelt, even at this time of the year—you don’t want to know how cold it is.”

“How did they learn to swim?” Sylvia said.

“There’s a health club and indoor pool in the building next to ours, and we started swimming lessons almost before they were out of diapers.”

My cell phone rang, and I looked at the display. “Hello, Father,” I said. “I’ll be right there—we’re out on the terrace, and you can’t hear the door chimes from out here.”

I went to the front door and opened it for Father and Angelina. “Come on in,” I said.

When they were in the foyer, Angelina said, “How is he?”

“He’s doing so well even his doctor can scarcely believe it. I think he’s asleep on the upstairs terrace, but I’ll go check. Meanwhile, we have one guest whom you haven’t met, and I’ll introduce you right now.”

“If you mean Dani’s sister,” Father said, “we met her at the hospital when you were elsewhere.”

“Really?” I said. “Nobody told me that. Let me go check on the patient.”

“The patient is right here,” Dani said from the foot of the stairs. “I was on my way to answer the door. Where were you?”

“Everyone was out on the terrace—you know how loud the waterfall is out there.”

“That’s true, I wouldn’t have heard the door if I hadn’t been on the way to the bathroom.”

Sylvia and Mrs. Rosati came in from the terrace and joined the conversation. Mrs. Rosati immediately asked Father and Angelina to stay for

lunch.

"We'd love to, but we can't," Angelina said. "I don't like to be away from the twins that long."

That prompted a female-type discussion of babies until Mrs. Rosati said she had to go to the kitchen and finish the cooking she had started earlier.

"Why don't we all sit down," I said, "especially the invalid."

"I'm hardly an invalid," Dani said. "I feel too good to be an invalid."

"Perhaps," I said, "but the fact that you 'feel' so good doesn't mean that your body is ready to cash all the checks that your brain wants to write."

"Listen to him," Father said. "He is a doctor, after all."

We sat and talked for a while. Then Angelina surprised me, saying, "Marco, did you know that my cousin Maria is pregnant?"

"No, I didn't."

"Aren't you her doctor?" she said.

"Not her obstetrician."

"Well, Stefano will probably tell you any day now."

"I haven't seen him around lately," I said.

"That is because," Father said, "he is in South Africa on business at the moment."

*Tracking down the elusive Rufus Parker, no doubt.*

After a few minutes, Angelina said, "Marcus, I need to get back to my babies."

I walked to the door and out to the car with them. "I can guess what kind of business Stefano is attending to, Father, am I correct?"

"You are indeed, and I expect to hear from him any day now."

"Very good."

They said goodbye, and I went back inside the house.

"That was a brief visit," Dani said.

"The woman clearly didn't want to be away from her babies very long," Sylvia said. "I know how it is with new mothers."

"How many rug rats do you have now, Sylvia?" Dani said.

"Five, ranging in age from ten to eighteen."

"I sort of knew what was going on with the rest of the family," he said, "because I would 'run into' Grandma once in a while on a Saturday, but she never talked about you."

"Well, of course not. When I married a Lutheran, I sort of became a non-person to her."

"Are you, still?" he said.

"As far as I know—I haven't seen or spoken to her in nearly twenty years."

"That's beyond sad," I said.

"It is what it is."

"Are you still in Connecticut?" Dani said.

"Not for years. Mickey accepted a partnership with a huge law firm in suburban D.C., and we've lived in Alexandria for a dozen years."

"You and Mom seem to have patched things up a bit."

"We're getting there, but it's a slow process—she asked me to come on this trip because none of the others could—or would—take the time."

Mrs. Rosati came to the living room door and announced, "By the time those boys are washed up, lunch will be ready."

"I'll go get Lucia," I said.

When we were assembled at the dining room table, we were treated to an amazing lunch. Even the boys, who were usually picky eaters, dug into the food and asked for more. Our dinner that evening was every bit as good as dinner had been Saturday evening. Monday morning I left early for the hospital, leaving Dani in the care of his family. I had a light lunch in the hospital café and a huge Italian meal when I got home that evening. Tuesday evening I was sufficiently delayed that I grabbed a bite in the hospital café and didn't arrive at the house until after everyone else had eaten. Mrs. Rosati met me at the door.

"Have you eaten?" she said.

"Yes, Ma'am. Where is everyone?"

"They're in the boys' room. I think Sylvia is reading a book to them."

"A book?" I said.

"Some sort of children's book she brought with her to give them."

"Sounds good. Let's go see."



We walked up the stairs, down the hall, and into the boys' room, where Sylvia and Dani were both sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by the triplets—all three of whom seemed to be beside themselves with laughter. She was holding an open book in her hands.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"Babe," Dani said, "you're not gonna believe this book."

"What is it?"

"The title is *Walter, the Farting Dog*, and it's hysterical."

"You're kidding," I said.

"Sylvia," Mrs. Rosati said, "is that what you brought for those children to read?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Shame on you."

"Why, Mom? It's a hugely popular series of children's books back home."

"Yeah," Dani said, "and children, especially little boys, find flatulence extremely funny."

"What's flatulence, Papa Dani?" Bernardo said.

"Farts."

"Cool."

I couldn't help it; I burst out laughing.

"Am I the only sane person in this house?" Mrs. Rosati said.

"Mom," Dani said, "we're all sane, you just don't like to talk about bodily functions."

"I'm going back downstairs and clean the kitchen," she said.

We had a great week, and the night before our guests were to fly home, Dani and I insisted on taking them to Poco for dinner. A window of opportunity opened in the schedule of the Aragoni-based Gulfstream when several people developed an urgent need to fly to the States, which caused schedules to be changed, and the ladies were spared the necessity of flying commercial. When we said goodbye to them in the hangar just before they boarded the plane, we were both genuinely sorry to see them leave.

On the way back to the house, I said, "I'm really sorry to see them go,

babe, but my waistline is glad. I've put on five pounds in as many days."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. When do we start working out again?"

"As soon as you're up to it."

"How about early Monday morning?" he said. "I'm anxious to get back to my lab."

"Yes to a limited amount of exercise, but let's wait and see what your doctor says about returning to work. Speaking of your lab, after the organs were harvested from the donor, I asked the pathologist to take a bone sample and save it for you."

"He give you a hard time about that?"

"I told him it was for a special project you were working on for my father."

"I'll bet that shut him up," he said.

"You know it did."

Dani's doctor gave his somewhat reluctant blessing the next day, and Dani returned to his regular work schedule. "Your recovery has been much too rapid," the doctor said, "but other than my reservations about that, I see no reason why you can't go back to work."

When I got back to my office, the doctor called me privately and asked me to monitor Dani's condition carefully—I assured him that I would do just that. Things went along smoothly, and we either worked out or swam laps every morning before we went to the hospital. It took a couple of weeks, but I managed to lose the extra weight I had gained, and Dani was back to his normal weight as well.

We were invited to a meeting in Father's office a couple of weeks later, at which Stefano, Ramsey, and Trevor were present. Stefano had succeeded in locating the elusive Rufus, and Ramsey and Trevor had flown to South Africa to pay him a visit. The visit had not gone well from the outset—Rufus was anything but happy to have his long-lost relatives show up out of the blue. He told them that he had gone to great lengths to drop out of sight all those years ago and preferred to remain that way. Ramsey and Trevor had persisted and had finally gotten the man to admit that it was his near relatives in the UK with whom he was still annoyed, but he harbored no resentment toward his extended family in general, or the Duke in particular. In the end, he agreed to come to Aragoni for a visit in a couple of months, and Ramsey and Trevor had returned home.

“How was Seth related to Rufus?” I said.

“His grandson,” Trevor said. “Evidently he and his father had a sort of falling-out, which explains why nobody knew about his family at the time of the accident.”

“What is the problem Rufus has with his family in the UK?” Father said.

“I don’t know,” Ramsey said, “but I’ve given it a great deal of thought.”

“Have you come to any conclusions?”

“He and I were never that close,” Ramsey said. “In fact, the only person to whom he was really close was his father—my grandson Algernon.”

“I recognize that name,” Father said. “He still resides in the UK, yes?”

“Yes, he does,” Ramsey said, “but the man has become a total recluse.”

“I think you need to go and talk to him,” Father said.

“I agree,” Ramsey said, “and I’ll go to the UK next week.”

“I’ll go with you,” Trevor said. “I haven’t seen Algie in donkey’s years.”

“That’s a good idea—the two of you were always close.”

We went home after the meeting, and I forgot all about the subject. Dani and I were taking the boys to Conti that weekend, and we were planning a trip to Paris for a long weekend with Joel and Claire a couple of weeks later. That weekend would include a performance of *Carmen* at the Paris Opera House, and we were really looking forward to the trip.

The weeks flew by, and we boarded the overnight train to Paris shortly after dinner on a Thursday evening and arrived in the *Gare de Lyon* railway terminal in Paris the next morning. Joel and Claire were on hand to meet us, and we were in their Paris apartment thirty minutes later.

“What, no villa?” I said when Claire pulled up in front of a nineteenth-century building a block off of the Rue St. Germaine on the left bank. When we visited them in Rome, they were living in a somewhat luxurious villa just outside the city.

“We considered buying a house on the outskirts of Paris,” Joel said, “but Claire stumbled upon this building and fell in love with it, so we bought a flat on the top floor.”

There was a tiny elevator, so we didn’t have to walk up several long

flights of steps to reach their flat.

"This is gorgeous," Dani said when he saw the interior of the flat. "Those ceilings must be twelve feet high, and look at that inlaid wood floor. Wow."

"Yeah," Joel said, "and it has what is loosely referred to as a river view—which means that if you climb up onto a chair, peek out the window, and look down the alley on the other side of the courtyard, you can actually see the Seine on a clear day—unless Madame LeBeau has her laundry on a line between the buildings."

"Joel!" Claire said somewhat sharply. "Enough of that. You know you like this flat as much as I do, and nobody in this area hangs their laundry on lines between buildings."

"Did you guys get a good night's sleep on the train?" Joel said.

"You bet," I said.

"Have a good breakfast?"

"That too. We were in a first-class compartment."

"Good, because Claire is gonna walk our legs off around the neighborhood, then we're gonna have lunch at the Two Maggots—leave it to the French to name a popular restaurant after a flesh-eating grub."

"Joel!" Claire said, even more sharply than before.

"It's okay, Claire," I said. "Last time we were in Paris, we stayed at the Hotel Saint Germaine, and it's right around the corner from *Les Deux Magots*."

"Yeah," Dani said, "we ate there several times and liked it. The café is a famous and historic place."

"Right," I said, "it was a rendezvous for famous writers in the twenties and later."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but sometimes my husband forgets that he ever had any class at all."

"What can I say, honey?" Joel said. "The French bring out the worst in me."

We thoroughly enjoyed our long weekend in Paris, during which we discovered that we, as a result of several visits over the past five years, were almost as knowledgeable about the city as our hosts. When they took us to the train station Monday afternoon, they begged us to come back soon, and we

made a tentative commitment to do so.

Back in Aragoni, we slipped back into the normal rhythm of our daily lives. Just before school began in September, we learned that Father had pulled off a miracle. Rufus had flown in from South Africa, and Trevor had persuaded Algernon Parker to be in the Duchy at the same time. Trevor and his father had escorted the two men separately and had contrived to arrive in Father's private office at the same time. The initial confrontation had not been pretty.

"Then," Trevor told us, "Grandfather told them both to shut up. He lectured them for a several minutes about family solidarity and told them to go into a closed room and not come out until they had settled their differences. Nobody knows what transpired in that room, but nearly an hour later they emerged in a state of guarded wariness, and I think time will take care of that."

"So," I said, "now we have a foothold in South Africa."

"That we do, and it's in one of the better wine-producing regions, to boot."

"Let me put you in touch with my cousin Luciano," I said. "The Conti Group recently purchased a wine distributorship, and they probably need a few contacts in South Africa."

"Certainly," Trevor said.

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CHAPTER 42

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*Marco*

SUMMER came to an end, and the boys started attending the kindergarten for five-year-olds. We managed to stay in the house on the mountain until the leaves began to turn, but in the end we were glad to be back in the castle when the snows began in earnest. Christmas with three five-year-olds in the house was a lively affair; I did my best to persuade Grandmother to come to Aragoni for the event, but she declined.

“Marco,” she said, “I’m comfortable here in Tuscany, and my old bones don’t tolerate freezing weather like they once did.”

We compromised by taking the boys to Siena and celebrating the arrival of the new year with her. My mother was pretty much herself, but the fact that the boys were actually her grandsons never seemed to quite register with her. We moved back to our house on the mountain in the spring just in time to celebrate the boys’ sixth birthday—they invited a few friends from kindergarten and had a great time. Then we settled down for a long and pleasant summer. And so it was—until Dani dropped a bombshell in our midst in early June.

“Marco,” he said one morning over breakfast, “you and I need to have a meeting with the Duke.”

“Really? Why?”

“And I think Modesto and Stefano should be there as well.”

“Again, why?”

“Just schedule the meeting and ask that it be held in some place that’s private—the Duke’s office would do.”

“What am I supposed to tell them about this meeting?” I said.

“Just that it’s important.”

“Okay, I’ll set it up.”

It took a couple of weeks to arrange, given the schedules of the people involved, but we arrived in Father’s office one evening after work and found Stefano and Modesto waiting with Father.

“Have a seat,” Father said.

We settled down in comfortable chairs next to the others, and Father looked expectantly at us.

“Dani,” I said, “you requested this meeting. What’s up?”

“I have some very good news,” he said. “At least it’s good news for you and me. On the other hand, it might not be such good news for the family.”

“Don’t play games,” I said. “Out with it.”

“Okay. As you know, my doctor monitors my blood very closely, and I just had my annual checkup. At that time, I was running DNA tests on a new batch of blood samples, and a vial of my blood was among the samples.”

“So?”

“Marco, I now have the same seven genes that you and all the male members of your family have.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know. Give me a few months to think about it, and I might come up with an answer. Consider how quickly I recovered from the transplant surgery—my doctor still calls it a miracle—I think those additional genes are responsible.”

“And how is this bad news for the family?” I said.

“Think about what would happen if word got out that our organs could transfer virtual immortality to their recipients.”

“We don’t know that,” I said.

“Not yet, we don’t. But when you think about my rapid recovery....”

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re going to have to find out what’s going on with the other people who received bits and pieces of Seth.”

“I thought about that and did a little snooping in the hospital records, but all we have is a record of the guy who received the liver and the other kidney, and he was airlifted to Geneva as soon as he was stable enough to make the flight. Your buddy Malcolm will have to get the rest of that

information from Dr. Rast in Geneva.”

“How many transplants are we talking about?” Father said.

“Besides the patient who received the liver and kidney,” I said, “someone would have gotten the heart, and the corneas probably went to two different people. I don’t think they used anything else.”

“We can probably rule out the corneas,” Dani said, “but it wouldn’t hurt to follow up on those patients, anyhow.”

“Now that I’ve had a minute or two to think about it,” I said, “we can probably rule out the heart as well.”

“Why?” Father said.

“Because the heart is little more than a pump, it’s just a muscle and it doesn’t really interact with the body chemically the way kidneys do. That being said, there should be a follow-up.”

“What would we need?” Stefano said.

“A blood sample from each patient,” Dani said, “and a follow-up sample in a year or so.”

“And if any of them now have the genes,” I said, “at some point—years down the road—they’re going to start wondering about themselves.”

“By the way,” Dani said, “there’s more.”

“Meaning?” I said.

“I’m pretty sure my bad kidney is now functioning normally.”

“How would you know that?” I said.

“Right now from my purely unscientific observation of how much urine I produce when I relieve myself. I’m hoping you can help me quantify that—I certainly can’t ask my doctor to do it, he’s already beside himself over my rapid recovery and I don’t need to make him suspicious.”

“Will do, and yes, I can come up with a way to check that kidney.”

“One more thing,” he said.

“Yes?”

“When I noticed the improvement in urine flow, I started gradually lowering my dosage of the anti-rejection medicine.”

“Dani!” I said, “That wasn’t smart. Not smart at all. How much have you reduced the medication?”



“As of today, I’m only taking half the usual dosage.”

“Wait a minute. You said you’d had blood work recently—a lower dose of your medication would have shown up in the results.”

“True, but who’s been in total charge of both my lab and the main hospital lab ever since Dr. Pirelli retired?” he said.

“What did you do?” I said.

“Pulled some test results from last year out of the computer, changed the date, and gave them to my doctor.”

“Dani, we need to talk about the risk you’re taking.”

“Marco, what’s done is done, and I’m gonna keep on reducing that dosage with or without your help.”

“Dani, you’re screwing around with your life here.”

“Something else just occurred to me,” Dani said, ignoring my last statement.

“Are you going to share it with us?” I said.

“I probably have a couple of samples of my blood somewhere in storage, blood that was drawn in the past. I’m wondering if a comparison between those samples and a current sample will reveal any additional substances in my system.”

“Which substances might lead us to understand how our genes work?” I said, completing his thought.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Why don’t you and I spend some time this evening doing a little brainstorming?”

“Count on it.”

“Do you need anything else from us at the moment, Father?” I said.

“I think not,” he said. “You have given us quite enough to think about. You and Dani can run along. Meanwhile, Stefano, Modesto, and I need to have a planning session and consider the implications of what Dani has told us.”

“Duke,” Dani said, “can I have a word with you?”

“Certainly.”

“Why don’t you walk to the elevator with Marco and me?”

When the three of us were near the elevators and there was nobody else around, Dani said, “Duke, I’ve never thanked you for what you did.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Father said.

“Bringing the organ donor from South Africa. It saved my life, and I appreciate it.”

“Dani,” Father said, taking one of Dani’s hands in his left hand and patting it with his right hand, “Marco is family, and you are with Marco—that makes you family, and I have been taking care of my family for a very long time.”

“Thank you anyway,” Dani said.

Father nodded and went back to his office. We were both quiet during the ride up the mountain, as well as during our somewhat belated dinner. After dinner, we carried glasses of wine upstairs and out onto the private terrace off of our bedroom.

“Okay,” I said. “Now that we can’t be overheard, I have to say that what you’re doing is foolish and risky beyond measure.”

“Marco, I know as surely as I’m sitting here that I’m right, so why don’t you shut up and help me prove it?”

“In your office first thing in the morning, okay?”

“You’re on,” he said.

“Now, let’s talk about blood.”

“Yeah, how do you think I should handle the tests?”

“Well, since your supply of blood that was drawn before the transplant is limited... wait a minute! Weren’t you donating autologous blood regularly, just in case? And if so, what happened to it?”

“Damn, why didn’t I think of that? They didn’t use it all, and what’s left of it is right there in the freezer, too—no longer suitable for use in transfusions, but more than adequate for testing purposes.”

“In that case, I would run every test you can think of and see what differences, if any, pop up.”

“If there are differences, how will we prove that they do or do not have any effect?” he said.

“Think back to one of our early brainstorming sessions with Father,” I said. “Didn’t we discuss the possibility of using the results of your research to

open a clinic or something?”

“Yeah. Of course before we could do that, there would have to be some trials, and that would involve actual patients.”

“Let’s sleep on that one,” I said, “and talk about it tomorrow or the next day. Maybe something will pop up.”

“Something’s popping up right now.”

“And what, if anything, are you gonna do about it?” I said.

“This... and this... and that... and race you to the bed.”

“You talked me into it.”

We were in the lab the next morning a full half-hour before anyone else was due at work. “Okay, Signor Doctor,” Dani said, “how long has it been since you’ve actually drawn blood?”

“Not so long that I’ve forgotten how.” I went to work with the appropriate tools and quickly obtained four vials of Dani’s blood. “That ought to hold you for a while,” I said.

“Yeah. Now can we go have breakfast? Remember I’ve been fasting since midnight because you were gonna draw blood this morning. By the way, don’t quit your day job—that hurt.”

“Sorry—I guess I’m out of practice. Give me a minute to write up an official request for all of the kidney tests you’re going to run. Gotta dot our I’s and cross our T’s for that. The other tests you can do in your private lab where there’s nobody looking over your shoulder but me.”

It took a couple of days for all of the various reports to land in my in-basket, and when they did, I studied them carefully. Based on the test results, Dani’s unscientific observations were spot-on—according to the reports, both kidneys were functioning at a hundred percent. We didn’t discuss the test results at work, but when we got home that evening, we spent a couple of hours going over all of the tests in some detail—kidney tests and ordinary blood tests.

“So,” I said at the end of our brainstorming session, “you have elevated levels of certain substances—at least when compared to blood drawn before the transplant.”

“Absolutely, and a couple of those substances are known to be associated with two of the genes—based on work being done in other places.”

“So, what do we do with this knowledge?”

“Without some sort of trials, we’ll never know.”

“I don’t want to burst your bubble, babe,” I said, “but conducting clinical trials would probably be a waste of time and money.”

“Why?” he said.

“Because of international rules and regulations, we’d have to conduct them in the Third World where bribery is a way of life. That option isn’t terribly attractive.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Also, think about this—we know what’s in your blood that’s different, and that’s all well and good, but we have no way to know how much of those substances your body is now producing—all your tests show are how much of them are left. There could even be substances that your body produces that are totally absorbed. In short, there are too many variables.”

“So what’s the alternative, then?”

“Ultimately, I think gene therapy is the answer, and then you get into the problem of deciding who gets it.”

“Shit,” he said.

“Yeah. I think we need to revisit this discussion a few times, put together a one-page report and send it to Father.”

“Only one page?”

“Yep. One page of bullet points ought to do it. If he wants any of the points elaborated on, all he has to do is ask.”

Just before quitting time a few weeks later, my phone rang. “Marco,” Dani said, “can you stop by my lab instead of meeting me downstairs?”

“Sure, why?”

“When you get here.”

I was sitting across from his desk ten minutes later while he finished studying several pieces of paper, waiting expectantly for him to say something.

Finally I said, “Well? Why am I here?”

“Because I received a shipment of blood packed in dry ice this morning.”

“And?” I said.

“It’s from the other transplant recipients.”

“I was wondering how the search was going.”

“To make a long story short,” he said, “the recipients of the corneas and the heart show no sign of having our genes.”

“And the other recipient?” I said.

“His liver failed and he died.”

“That’s it, then.”

“Babe, you didn’t let me finish. He died, but the kidney was given to another guy.”

“And?”

“He has the genes.”

“I think we need to have another meeting with Father and the others.”

“Yeah,” he said.

Except for Father, the other participants were going to be in and out of the country a great deal in the near future, so it was more than a month before we met in Father’s office. Dani and I handed our report to the others, sat back, and waited.

“This is it,” Father said, “two pages?”

“Father,” I said, “Dani and I have spent untold hours discussing the situation, and we always come back to those few points.”

“And your conclusion,” Stefano said, “is that we do nothing?”

“For the moment, yes. There’s just no practical way to try to figure out how to pass what we have along to others and keep it a secret—at least, not until we have enough family members with the scientific credentials to do some serious research.”

“And,” Dani said, “when the day comes that others discover what we have, we’d better be ready for the consequences.”

“You mean an overpopulated and possibly hungry world,” Modesto said.

“Exactly.”

“Meanwhile,” I said, “we need to keep an eye on the guy who received that kidney—eventually, he’s going to start asking questions about himself.”

“YOU know what this means, don’t you?” Dani said as we rode down in the elevator.

“Yeah.” I retrieved my microcassette recorder from a pocket, held it close to my mouth, pushed the *record* button, and said, “Memo regarding the patient Danilo Rosati—Prognosis: Forever,” and put the recorder back in my pocket.

“It looks that way, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, and it just hit me—I’m never gonna be able to replace you with a young stud.”

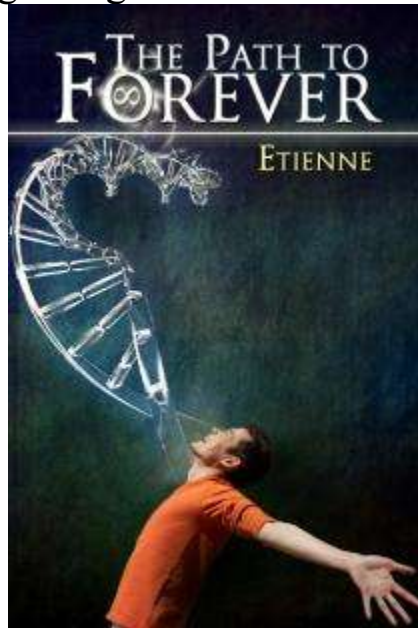
“I’ll get you for that.”

“Promises, promises.”

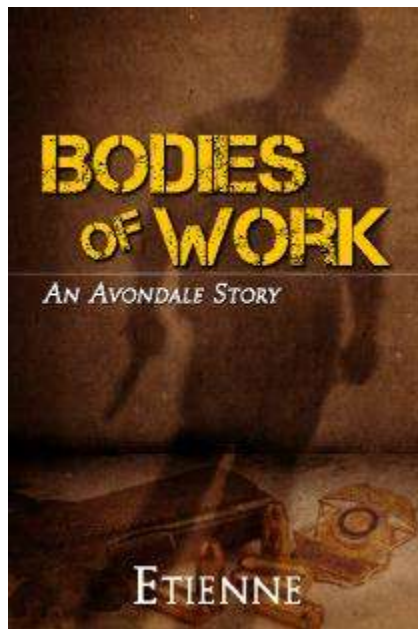
ETIENNE lives in central Florida, very near the hamlet in which he grew up. He always wanted to write but didn't find his muse until a few years ago, when he started posting stories online. These days he spends most of his time battling with her, as she is a capricious bitch who, when she isn't hiding from him, often rides him mercilessly, digging her spurs into his sides and forcing the flow of words from a trickle to a flood.

Visit Etienne at <http://www.etiennestories.blogspot.com>. You can contact him at [Etienne.Reynard@comcast.net](mailto:Etienne.Reynard@comcast.net).

Read the beginning of Marco and Dani's story in



And also by ETIENNE



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A black and white advertisement featuring a silhouette of two men in a romantic pose, nearly kissing. The background is dark, and the silhouettes are highlighted against a lighter, hazy background. In the upper left corner, there is a diamond-shaped logo containing a spiral design. The text "dreamspinner Press" is written in a stylized, cursive font in the upper right corner. Below the silhouettes, the text "For more of the best M/M romance, visit" is centered. At the bottom, the "Dreamspinner Press" logo is repeated in a larger, more ornate cursive font, followed by the website address "www.dreamspinnerpress.com".

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