

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Impenetrable Fortress of Montalcino

January 13, 1997

We were back in Siena following our weekend excursion to Rome. I was still operating on full sensory overload. In the span of a few days, I had seen some of the greatest masterpieces of western art — including a personal favorite, Raphael’s “School of Athens” — explored two of the major cities of my homeland, and had immersed myself in the history and theology of my religion. I had even completed a pilgrimage to the Vatican and purchased two sets of rosary beads blessed by the pope. Overstimulated, I found myself bombarded by a slew of existential thoughts. I was like a dog with a bone, gnawing away at the same questions, over and over.

Why did I buy even one rosary, let alone two? Was I still Catholic? If so, what kind? Why was I born Italian and not something else? What does it mean to be Italian? The Italians I had known in Junior High School cursed or ignored me because I was too concerned with reading and joking around and wearing pinstripe suits and purple shirts. Meanwhile, as many friends as I had made in Geneseo, there were not a lot of Italians among the Newman Community members I befriended, and there weren’t a lot of Catholic or centrist STD members. Did I have a people? Did I have a tribe? I had thought going to Italy would resolve this crisis for me in some manner or other. Had it?

My hopes were partly dashed by supremely weird sights such as the bone mosaic and the Slaughter of the Innocents. Still, having seen such sights, I understood better why Italian movie directors made such violent films. The culture was steeped in violent art. After the bone mosaic, the gory murders in *Suspiria* seemed like scenes out of *Toy Story*. No wonder Brian DePalma, Martin Scorsese, and Quentin Tarantino all made such violent films. Still, the omnipresent bloody imagery was a bit much to process.

The language barrier was a bigger problem than I expected. Also, the centuries of history, while making the country fascinating and far more delicious than the comparatively young United States, meant I had a lot of catch-up learning to do before I could begin to assimilate.

Were these Italians from Italy really my people? Or was Damien Cavalieri just an American after all? I thought of Superman, who probably never felt like a bona fide human being, but a disguised Kryptonian in permanent exile in Metropolis. He probably hoped one day he could go back in time to visit Krypton before it exploded. He would then immerse himself in his real heritage and discover his true self. But even if Superman could find a way to return to a thriving Krypton, what would he find? People dressed as aliens, while he wore Clark Kent's human clothing. People speaking Kryptonian, while he spoke English. Superman probably never felt more Kryptonian when he was on Earth and never felt more human than when he was back on Krypton. I felt the same way in Italy. I never felt more Italian than when I was in America, and never felt more American than when I was in Italy. I was sick to death of feeling alienated.

Of course, it wasn't all strangeness in Italy. The food, for one thing, made me eternally happy. If only all the fast-food burger joints in America could blink out of existence and be replaced by these Italian restaurants. Also, if anything made me feel safe and welcome in Italy, it was the reassuring presence of the Virgin Mary. Mary was a staple of front lawns in Italian Catholic neighborhoods of Staten Island and Brooklyn. Still, by and large, America's Puritanical obsession with the inherent evils of idolatry kept art depicting Mary hidden from view. This subtle censorship angered and bored me. Conservative Protestants hated Catholic art because it was the wrong kind of Christianity — and Catholics are all destined to go to hell — and too many liberals hated Catholic art because it wasn't secular. Yawn. It often seemed to me that the one truth that both Democrats and Republicans agreed on was that Catholics were Neanderthals. No wonder us Italian Americans had no idea how to vote. What was the good of having a multicultural nation if every culture was afraid of showing its true religious, political, and artistic colors? Yes, it made a nice change of pace seeing Mary frequently about town, always welcoming me with her open arms, offering a motherly embrace.

Perhaps the most moving moment of all served as both a cultural touchstone and the capstone to my three years of study as an English major and Medieval Studies minor at Geneseo. Valancourt took us on

a day trip to Florence primarily to visit the Basilica di Santa Croce, a church filled with funerary monuments dedicated to great Italians I had taken entire courses about at Geneseo, including Galileo Galilei, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Dante. I couldn't believe that monuments to these figures whose personal letters, writings, and works of art I had studied so deeply were all in the same place, along with Leonardo Da Vinci, who popped up in a variety of my classes. I placed my hand over each of their memorials, and silently thanked them for modeling for me what Italian greatness looked like. I didn't tear up, because there were some emotional disconnects: The Middle Ages was a very long time ago, and I was a Southern Italian studying a bunch of guys more from the north. Still, it was a moment I have always carried with me, and a happy one.

How many people did I know who could relate to me having such an experience? A handful? None? How many people value history, art, religion, science, literature, and politics enough to even begin to grasp how seeing those tombs made me feel? Perhaps the issue wasn't my being a real Italian or a real American. Perhaps the issue was my being a real humanist. Sergio was Italian, but he didn't talk like someone who would respect me for being this moved by Santa Croce. Arwen was Jewish, but she *would* understand my reaction. No, my alienation from other people was not necessarily caused by religion or ethnicity, but about my being a humanist over a capitalist. That was the dominant issue in my life. The question of my being a real Italian or not was a vitally important concern, but secondary to the humanist issue.

My friend James Sheridan had tried to explain this to me when Byron Baldwin first introduced us a couple of years ago. James was tall and slim, with a runner's physique, and handsome in a Farley-Granger-meets-Montgomery-Clift kinda way. He was a history major with a particular interest in the American Gilded Age and would become the editor of the Geneseo school newspaper, *The Lamron*. Byron met James while looking for a lab partner in a Chemistry general education course. They got to talking and the moment James mentioned he had grown up on Staten Island before moving to Syracuse when he was in sixth grade, Byron knew he had to put us together. It turned out, we had far more in common than Byron could have dreamed. James had been

an ALEC student at the Alfred Dreyfus School and had Mr. Altman as a teacher one year before I did. Once we met, James' description of what the ALEC program meant to him and his life helped put my own experiences in some perspective. As he explained it, "If you want to know why I study so hard, and am such a perfectionist, it is because ALEC really affected me. There was so much one-upmanship. It was intense and hard to keep up."

I said, "I was under the impression I didn't fit in because I was Italian."

James pondered that idea. "I think it was because you weren't as competitive as the others, and because you were into art and the humanities. The other students had embraced Social Darwinist ideas and were almost all STEM students. The ethnic divide is a red-herring."

This new idea made me rethink my entire life, which flashed before my eyes as if I were a Looney Tunes character frozen in place, gaping up in the air at an anvil plummeting towards my head. "Wow," I said. "That makes so much sense. It also explains why I didn't instantly gel with all the Italians I met outside of the gifted program. They didn't value the arts or humanities either, not because they were ambitious STEM students, but the children of laborers who thought all that stuff wasn't manly enough. Man, does anybody appreciate art, music, or the humanities?"

James nodded, "Yeah. Women."

My life flashed before my eyes again. "Aha! That's why I don't like talking to men! Except for you and maybe five other dudes. James, I want to marry you and have your babies!"

After taking a moment to think what I'd just said over, James decided I was sane, and said what I hoped he would: "Thank you. I'll take that as a compliment."

"You two had the same fifth-grade teacher one year apart? That's nuts!" Byron looked like he was feeling a bit left out. I was sorry about that, since I was very grateful for him finding James for us to be friends with. Byron had placed me in the company of someone who solved the mystery of my educational identity, and the riddle of why I kept bouncing in and out of various gifted programs. It all came down to my relationship to the humanities, and the level of disrespect afforded

the humanities in America. Before the end of this Italy trip, Byron would strike gold a second time. He would put me in the way of an old Italian man who would solve for me the riddle of my Italian heritage.

But first, I had to try to make out with Evelyn . . .

Another week of classes followed. While the other five students and I listened to Valancourt's lectures in the mornings, Evelyn explored Siena and made plans for her next weekend trip, which would *not* be Venice, but Ravenna. She kept urging me to change my mind and go with her. After all, Dante's real tomb was in Ravenna. That memorial in Santa Croce did not contain his actual corpse. Still, I had to see San Marco in Venice. Neither of us would budge for the sake of the other. For his part, Taran wouldn't stop lobbying me to go to Padua, and he had convinced Byron that was the way to go. I didn't understand why it was so confusing to the others why I wanted to go. It was Venice, after all. My church was there, the streets were made of water, and it was the setting of Henry James' novel *Wings of the Dove*. Venice was also the place where Indiana Jones made love to Elsa Schneider and the dwarf in the red coat stabbed Donald Sutherland to death. In the end, Byron and Purple Sarah accompanied me to Venice, and we all loved it, even if I didn't have a refined enough palette to enjoy eating an octopus in black-ink sauce. Since Evelyn had gone to Ravenna instead, I got to hum Charles Aznavour's "How Sad Venice Can Be" on the train ride down, but not really mean it. I was in too good a mood to be truly crushed. Even though it was touristy, we took a gondola ride and loved it. I took a huge ferry back and forth across Venice multiple times because it was awesome. In Saint Marc's Square, Byron stood like a scarecrow and let birds land on him. Purple Sarah photographed me in front of San Marco's, waving "Hello" to Mom.

Mother, I have come home!

That trip occurred on the weekend of the seventeenth. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth, Byron and I ate dinner with Sarah and Evelyn each night. Since the food at the Locanda Garibaldi was exceptional, we frequently ate there. Wherever we went, we tried a new meal. Each night Byron would wind up with a plate that looked twice as good as mine. Then, the next night, I'd get what he had the night before, and he would be blessed with something that looked better

still. When I knew I would be going to Italy, part of me feared that the cooking there would be so good that it would make my mother's best dishes, especially her home-made lasagna, seem inadequate. I was thankful that lasagna from Siena tasted totally different from my mother's version. Since the two kinds were apples and oranges, her cooking could remain undefeated in my heart, even after I tasted the cuisine of the motherland. I could stop worrying.

Our palettes developed over the course of these meals. I had always been more of a tea drinker than a coffee drinker and, as a result, did not fully appreciate either cappuccino or tiramisu. Before long, I was drinking cappuccino and eating tiramisu with every meal and developing an insatiable hunger for them. They were so delicious. I had *no* idea! I was a full-on convert to both cappuccino and tiramisu now and would remain so for life. Also, while I had not been a huge olive fan, I started to really love them, cultivating my taste with the black olive — the gateway olive — before moving onto the green one. For all the food we ate, you would have thought that we put on a ton of weight while in Italy. The reverse was true. We ate a large lunch and light breakfasts and dinners, and did so much walking that, by the time we returned to America, we had all lost five to ten pounds.

Every night after dinner, I would walk around Siena with Evelyn. Sometimes Byron and Sarah walked with us, but not always. On a lark, the four of us saw an Italian-dubbed version of the Sylvester Stallone movie *Daylight* at a local theater. Since it was a disaster movie, dialogue was not important, and we all enjoyed it. We also went to see Madonna in *Evita* two nights in a row because we loved it. A few years had passed, but Madonna was still my old friend in the yummy teddy from the "Like a Prayer" music video, who had helped introduce me to the idea that women were "super purty." Taran went with us the first night and declared *Evita* the worst film he had ever seen. Amusingly, Taran could speak with perfect conviction about a subject, no matter how profound or how minor, and sway me almost every time, but I retained some of my enjoyment of *Evita*, even after Taran had put a huge dent in my enthusiasm.

"Own your reaction," Evelyn advised me. "There are no wrong responses to art. Even if there are, be proud of being wrong. Your

experience of art is your experience of art. Embrace that and don't be influenced by anyone else. Respond to what you respond to."

I pointed to Taran. "I really want him to think I have good taste, but I kinda like *Evita*."

Taran nodded enthusiastically. "Evelyn is right. *Evita* is a pile of shit, but if you're the sort of person who likes immersing himself in shit, then by all means, take a deep dive into it."

"Madonna's my girl," I declared. "It's cool. I'm not too shy to tell people I actually like *Secret Wars*, Bon Jovi, and *Star Trek V*. Never fear: I hate *Maximum Carnage* and *Generations*."

Taran had never heard of *Secret Wars*, but closed his eyes and counted backwards from a hundred to stop himself from opining on Bon Jovi and William Shatner's opus, *Star Trek V*.

It was great spending all this time with Evelyn, but I desperately wanted to be alone with her on a date. What would it be like to have dinner with just her? There were too many people around us and it was too much of a habit for us all to get together every night for food to break off and do our own thing. For months prior to this trip, I had fantasized about having an affair in Italy. Would I meet a saucy Italian bar wench, or a bookish British tourist? Could I be the younger man one of the older British ladies from *Enchanted April* had a passionate affair with? Would a romance with such a woman — or with Evelyn — be a short fling, or would I be meeting my future wife? No. Let's not get carried away. This was me we were dealing with. And yet, could I take some concrete action to make a fantasy into a reality? What if I did, actually, ask Evelyn out? Could something happen between us? Or was sex only for Tuesday and Bobby Mammolito, who had been humping loudly the entire trip? Just as I settled on making a move, I felt my grandfather's reticence build within me. Failure was inevitable. Why even try? Also, I had such a nice friendship with her. Why would I want to ruin it? For the opportunity to make out? There would almost certainly not be sex, considering our personalities. Was a handful of kisses and maybe a quick breast squeeze worth the risk of blowing our friendship to smithereens?

I thought about it at length and concluded that I was prepared to destroy the friendship.

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January 21, 1997

I returned to my room in the Locanda Garibaldi to greet Byron with a sullen face. "I don't know what to do about Evelyn."

"That makes two of us," Byron replied.

It was clear Byron was not overly interested in the conversation, but I needed to talk to him. "I think she knows I'm attracted to her."

"And?"

"She's pushing me away."

"So, don't hang out with her anymore."

"Weirdly, she may like me back. I think. I'm getting mixed signals."

"I don't know, Damien. She spends a lot of time following you around, but that might not mean anything. She might just want to be your friend, or some bullshit."

"I've just been talking to her for two hours in her room," I said. "For a while, it was a great conversation. She talked to me about why she loves medieval art and how her dream is to one day become a coach for the Mets."

"The Mets, huh? Not the Yankees?"

"She hates Steinbrenner," I confirmed. "Says he buys all his championships."

"That's great. You hate baseball and medieval art."

I smiled. "She's so enthusiastic about these things that it rubs off on me. I see the beauty of the art and the excitement of the sports through her. Anyway, we got to talking and I was so excited by her that I tried to move in closer. I wanted to kiss her. But I was scared I'd get the Recoil. I couldn't just plant one on her. But asking for permission is like negotiating a contract. Kills all the romance. I had to figure on something in between."

Byron was finally paying attention. "What did you do?"

"When the moment felt right, I brushed her cheek with my hand and told her she was beautiful."

"What happened?"

I dropped down onto my bed and stared up at the high, white ceiling. "I think it embarrassed her. I don't think she's used to that kind of attention."

Byron laughed. "That doesn't sound too good for you."

"She spent the last half hour telling me how she never wants to get married or have kids, and since the only purpose of dating is to find someone to marry, she's not interested." How had the conversation gone? I asked her if she wasn't worried about wasting her youth. She asked me what the upshot would be of enjoying her youth. From her perspective, the inevitable outcome would be one of two things: "So, I can be a divorced, thirty-year-old single mom saddled with a five-year-old kid? Or I could be a bitter, forty-year-old woman with two kids in high school and a mute, disengaged husband sleeping with his secretary? What price is paid for enjoying youth?"

I spread my hands in frustration. "Well, if you want to be *negative* about it."

I related all this to Byron and he clenched his hair in his fists. "That was her response to you telling her she's beautiful? That crap?"

"Yes. She does have a point."

"No, she doesn't. To hell with her."

I cleared my throat. "I think she's protecting me from falling for her because she knows we can't be together."

"She's right," Byron said. "You'll regret this down the line. She lives in Royville and you live on Staten Island."

"If I'm too scared to make a move in this situation, where there's little to lose and a lot to gain, then how can I hope to be brave when the stakes are higher?"

"You'll probably never see each other again after this trip is over."

"All the more reason to act quickly," I said.

"It's not worth it."

I sucked my teeth in irritation. "I thought you wanted me to act more like Lancelot!"

"I do."

"What's the deal? You want her for yourself?"

Byron was wounded. "No! Of course not. She doesn't like Billy Joel. You can have her. Still, I don't like the idea that she's the first person you're gonna ask out in three years, and she's frigid. What do you do when she breaks your heart? Take another vow of celibacy? You really are better off chasing some horny married broad than gambling

on this 'available' ice queen."

I paused. "Speaking of Guinevere, is there anything I can do to convince you to take the curse of the Cat People off my head?"

"No, there isn't. It's for your own good."

I tried to sound indifferent to this news. "Good thing I'm not superstitious."

"But you *are* superstitious," Byron said.

I chuckled.

Tuesday's voice came through the wall. "Ask Evelyn out, Damien. If she says, 'No,' she says, 'No.' Shake off the rejection and try asking out someone else. That's how it works."

"Thanks, Tuesday!" I called back through the wall.

"There's no privacy in this damn hotel," Byron grumbled.

"Don't you think she's being slow to respond?" I called back to Tuesday.

Tuesday's voice broke back through the wall. "You were sitting on her bed talking for hours about the *Mets*? Maybe she thinks you're slow to respond. Maybe she's wondering why you haven't flipped her over and gently slid your dick into her asshole yet."

My jaw dropped. "What did she just say?" I mouthed to Byron.

"Come on," Byron said to the wall. "Evelyn's so damn repressed."

"All the more reason to fuck her ass good," Tuesday called back. "I'm quiet, and I love me some ass play, but only if enough lube is involved."

"*Lube?*" *Don't auto mechanics use lube? Must be a different kind of lube...*

Byron turned green and sat down on the edge of his bed. "I think I need to go downstairs and get me a mineral water."

"She's worried I'll get her pregnant, I think," I said to the wall.

"What have we been talking about?" Tuesday replied. "You are up on your biology, right? You won't get her pregnant if you give her a fierce ass ramming."

"She can probably hear all this through the ceiling," I whispered to Byron.

"Thanks for the advice," Byron called back to Tuesday.

"No problem," the wall replied in Tuesday's voice.

"Seems like great advice, if you want to get yourself arrested," Byron said quietly.

Byron and I laughed soundlessly until we cried. Once we recovered ourselves, I wanted to reassure Byron I wasn't ignoring his advice. "I'm not an idiot. I know I'm working against some kind of phobia of hers that's preventing her from giving in to her attraction to me. But I may manage to break down her defenses if I'm persistent."

"I'm a big believer in, 'If it don't come easy, you better let it go,'" Byron said.

"I'm just tired of being afraid of living," I said. "I'm going to do it. I don't care about the future. All I care about is right now."

Byron stared at me. "This doesn't sound like you. What changed?"

I smirked. "What you are now, we once were. What we are now, you will be."

Byron laughed. "Party now, before the next Black Death hits! Because, when it does, none of us will be allowed to fuck anyone without risking becoming lepers!"

January 22, 1997

The next afternoon, sitting on the great double-bed in Evelyn's room, with Evelyn beside me, I said, "How is it somebody as pretty as you has no boyfriend?"

Evelyn smiled and looked down on the bed. "I don't know. I just don't. I haven't even liked anyone since I was nineteen."

"*Six years?*"

Evelyn nodded. "I don't have much use for dating, anyway."

Okay, here goes. "Would you mind if I asked you to dinner? Just the two of us?"

"I'd like that very much," Evelyn said softly.

The dinner date happened that night. We were oddly formal with one another at the outset, typical of two people who had little experience with romance. Neither of us knew what we were doing, so we were forgiving of one another. After we got to the restaurant, it became clear that Evelyn was not the sort of person who responded well to

gentlemanly gestures like opening doors or buying flowers. This put me on guard, because those traditions had helped me demonstrate my feelings in the past, and I was no longer able to use them as a crutch. Instead, I would be natural and talk to her as he had been all along. I made no romantic moves towards her the night before because she didn't seem ready for them, and the time wasn't right. I had wanted their relationship to evolve slowly and naturally. The evening was so enjoyable that I was only partly disappointed we didn't kiss. I still didn't know where I stood with her, because she was so eccentric, but I knew she wouldn't agree to the date if she didn't feel *something*.

January 23, 1997

The next major outing was to the Fortress Castle in Montalcino, designed by Mino Foresi and Domenico di Feo of Siena and built in 1361. Valancourt chartered a bus to take the students to the structure, which stood in the middle of the most beautiful scenery I had ever seen. Had I ever seen a horizon before that day in Montalcino? Growing up in the crowded suburbs, I rarely had an opportunity to see a clear sky, let alone the miles of beautiful land that cultivated the grapes used to make Brunello di Montalcino wine. The five-sided fortress was obviously man-made, but so old and grandiose that I imagined it had grown organically from the rocky ground — a stone plant that morphed into a fortress. An impressive tower sprouted from each angle of the pentagon, and all the students were eager to see the view of the hill town from the top of at least one of the towers. Thankfully, Valancourt gave us the time we needed to wander around the castle. As we explored, he sent Taran to buy and bring back lunch for us all, so we could picnic on the wooden tables in the courtyard.

I had hoped that the castle would be cool enough, and the walls high enough, that I could walk along the battlements atop the five walls without triggering my fear of heights. Sadly, that was not to be. When we reached the top of the main wall, Byron's face lit up like a kid at Christmas. He ran up and down the battlements whooping out with joy. As a fan of Drizzt Do'Urden of *Forgotten Realms* and

worshipper of the movie *Braveheart*, Byron had found the Italy he had been looking for. A startling contrast to Byron, I crept tentatively along the crumbling battlements, wondering how anyone could stand guard on such a precarious position, let alone defend it during a siege. One false move and you were a bloody pancake on the floor.

Byron stopped running around long enough to notice how unsteady I was on my feet. "Don't tell me you're scared."

I smiled sheepishly.

"You got to be kidding! This is the coolest thing ever, and you're scared?" He laughed and then continued running around, pretending to brandish a sword. "I am William Wallace! 'Every man dies, but not every man truly lives!' 'They may take our lives, but they will never take our freedom!' 'FREEDOM!'"

"Yeah, I'm not truly living," I grumbled, and felt myself teeter on the battlement edge.

Somehow, while I was trying to keep my balance, Evelyn and Sarah found their way up to this level. "You coming with us to see the tops of the towers?" Sarah asked.

"That's the plan." I swallowed the lump in my throat. *Towers, plural? One ain't enough?*

Evelyn made her way to the closest tower, and Sarah and I followed. Evelyn stopped at a long ladder made of sturdy pieces of wood. She stared up and saw that it was a long climb to the top. More than fifty feet? "Wow. That looks scary." She got halfway up the ladder before she felt a pang of fear, paused, and looked down at me.

"It's okay," I said. "Just head on up. Don't look down."

She nodded and crept her way up. She disappeared through the hole at the top of the tower. *If I dart up the ladder as quickly as I can, I can impress her by being extra brave. I can also be alone with her at the top of the tower. That would be a good time to kiss her. I can kiss a lady in a tower. Byron's Arthurian Romance high is becoming contagious.*

Without looking down, I raced up the ladder as quickly as I could. Reaching the top, I clambered up out of the gaping hole in the tower floor and stepped out onto what was probably the smallest elevated platform ever made. The half-ruined tower was missing large chunks of its wall, so there would be no barrier preventing anyone who

wanted to from simply walking off the edge. Everywhere I looked, I saw a huge drop. In front of me, there was a sheer drop along the side of the castle. On my left and right were other drops where I could splatter all over the castle interior. Behind me was a plummet to my death down the long ladder.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .

Evelyn tossed her arms back and breathed in the open air. “What a wonderful view!”

“Oh, my God,” I moaned. I didn’t want to move my legs because any step would take me closer to the edge, but not moving my legs made me feel wobbly. Each time I wobbled, I saw the drop. *Uh-oh. Getting dizzy. I should just go back down the ladder. I got up it. I could go down.*

I peered down the ladder. The first rung was so far down I would have to lower myself waist-deep into the hole until my feet found support. What if I missed that first rung? My eyes fixed upon the plummet through space that awaited me if I slipped. I sat myself on the stone floor beside the hole, unwilling to try to lower myself onto the ladder. I hugged my knees to my chest, too afraid to do anything but stare off into nothingness. I wouldn’t allow my eyes to register the sky around me. I had always been afraid of heights, but never had such an attack of vertigo before. Even during my most intense junior high school skirmishes with bullies, I never felt so close to my own death.

“Are you okay?” Evelyn asked. She rested a hand on my shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

God, why does she have to see me like this? Why do I have to be so weak in front of a woman? I have to be strong. I have to impress her, so she loves me.

Purple Sarah popped her head up from the hole in the ground. “Ah, it’s nice up here.” She hoisted herself up off the ladder and out of the hole onto the tower. “What’s wrong, Damien?”

“Nothing, I’m okay,” I said. *Fuck. Fucko. Fucki. Fucka. Fuckiamo. Fuckate. Fuckano.*

Sarah must have adored the view from the tower because she faced each of the four main compass points and called the quarters, using the updated spell translation provided by the recent witchcraft

movie, *The Craft*. “Hail to the Guardians of the Watchtowers of the North! By the Powers of Mother and Earth, Hear us.” She invoked the guardians for the other three points, too.

Bobby and Tuesday climbed up out of the ladder hole next. How could we all fit on such a small tower? As the students walked around the hole in the floor, they had to avoid bumping into one another. None of them seemed scared. *What’s with these people?*

“What a beautiful view,” said Tuesday.

“Egon!” Bobby yelled. “You look scared shitless! Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” I quivered.

Bobby punched my shoulder. “Shake it off, dude. You don’t want to look bad in front of all these stone-cold foxes.”

“I know, I know. I’m trying.”

Impatient to see each of the towers in the time allotted by Valancourt, Bobby and Tuesday skittered back down the ladder, sprinted along the battlements below, and climbed at high speed up to the top of the next tower. I was half-aware they were bouncing around the castle top as easily as Spider-Man and I was amazed by their dexterity and bravery.

Byron’s head appeared in the hole in the ground. “Hey! You’re up here! Is it as awesome as it seems?” He pulled himself onto the tower, gushed at the scenery all around the castle, and proceeded to take as many photographs of it as he could. “This is a life-changing experience, dude. You should try to enjoy it.”

“I wish I could,” I said. I had clamped my eyes shut and had no access to any scenery.

Evelyn moved closer to me and said gently, “Want me to help you down the ladder?”

“Yes, please.” *Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee . . .*

“Want me to go down first and you follow, or do you want me to help lower you down?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice wavering. As mortified as I was, I tried to be big and laugh at myself. I managed a smile and small laugh. *Glory be to the Father, and the Son . . .*

"You have to tell me, or I can't help you," said Evelyn.

"I'll go first." I moved slowly towards the hole in the ladder and then stopped abruptly. "Wait. No. I can't."

"Do you want me to go first?" Evelyn whispered.

"Yes, please, Miss Evelyn."

"Okay."

Evelyn walked over to the hole and tried to figure out how to lower herself onto the ladder. She sat on the edge of the hole, dangling her legs in the air over the first rung. She then planted her hands on either side of the hole and pushed her bottom over the edge. She hung in the air a moment, supported only by her locked arms. Then she bent her elbows and her feet found ground. Once this was done, she had to do an awkward maneuver to turn herself around so she could back down the stairs. Then, she was ready and climbed quickly down the stairs.

What was that, a seventeen-step process to find the first ladder rung?
Christ.

Several seconds went by.

"Damien!"

"Yes?"

"I made it down."

"Okay."

"Come and see."

I slowly leaned forward and peered into the hole. She was at the base of the ladder, looking up. She was so far below, she looked like an action figure. "You can do it, Damien."

Byron, who was still on the tower with me, agreed. "You can do it, man."

I exhaled sharply through my nose. "Okay."

I stood and tried to will myself to approach the ladder. I was posed as if I would start walking, but I wasn't in any danger of moving. Some time passed.

"What are you trying to do, use the Force?" asked Byron. "Go down the fucking ladder!"

I laughed. That joke was the inspiration I needed to get going. I'd had it with looking the fool in front of Evelyn. Focusing only on her face, I duplicated the same maneuver she used to find the first

rung. I knew I was home free the moment my feet reached the rung. I went down the ladder as quickly as I could. Suddenly, I was at Evelyn's side again.

She gave me a thumbs up sign. "There you go. You made it."

"Thanks. That sucked."

She pointed up at the hole in the tower where Byron had appeared to make his descent. "You looked so cute when your head appeared up there, looking down on me. You had this adorable, frightened chipmunk face on."

I pictured it and laughed. "Good lord, I can imagine."

On the bus ride back to Siena, Evelyn was oddly cool to me. We sat next to one another, but she seemed to not want to speak to me at all. Saying she was not feeling well, she placed headphones over her ears and started listening to her Ringo Starr CD. She didn't speak a word the trip back. After reaching the hotel, I complained to Byron about her for twenty minutes. Byron agreed with everything I said, but no longer opposed my continued pursuit of her.

Shortly after nightfall at 6:30, I went to Evelyn's room. I sat on the bed beside her as she made up a list of all the Mets games of the current season and tried to calculate how many she'd be able to realistically see commuting from Royville. She spoke rapidly and nervously as she told me about it, again an odd mixture of standoffishness and eagerness. Part of her screamed out for me to kiss her while the other part just wanted to make me go away. For half a second, I thought that Evelyn was wordlessly signaling me to start unbuckling her belt, like Tuesday suggested. Then I realized that Tuesday was wrong. Evelyn wasn't signaling me. It was my dick asking me to reach for Evelyn's belt. This truth was surprisingly difficult for me to admit to myself, but it was the way things were. I couldn't grab her belt. Nope. Nope. Nope.

"Do you want to take a walk?" I asked. It was two hours earlier than we usually walked with Sarah and Byron, so the request was unusual.

Evelyn considered this before giving a slightly hesitant, "Yes."

It was a cold night out. We walked side by side to the D'Uomo, the main church of Siena. It was her favorite building in the city, and we would often include it on their walks, but she was particularly insistent that we head directly for the church. It was a none-too-subtle way of telling me she was still confused about our relationship. When we reached the church, she asked that we go to the other side of the main square and sit on a low wall across from its façade. I sat next to her on the cold stone, looking with her at the dozens of saints' statues on the Gothic structure. She considered saying something about the artistry of the church but didn't.

As I sat there with her, looking at the church, I knew there would never be a better time. She was ready and so was I. I reached down and gently placed my hand on hers. She lowered her head and smiled in muted disbelief. I laced my fingers through hers and moved closer.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "There must be so many things you'd rather be doing than sitting here with me."

"There are," I said, and leaned forward to kiss her.

She lifted her head to mine, letting my lips touch hers. I placed my arm around her waist and pulled her closer to me as I kissed her. I felt the warmth of her body through her coat. Once the kiss started, we abandoned all the inhibitions that had been holding us in check from the beginning. She put her arms tentatively around my neck and kept kissing me, not doing anything to push me away. As we kissed, I was aware of the D'Uomo beside us, standing there as it had always stood, every day for the past five hundred years.

How is this happening? How am I with this wonderful person? I shoved the unwanted thoughts aside. Even though I knew that we might never be together again after we returned to America, I felt happy and alive. For the first time in years, I wasn't afraid of living.