

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The Real Italian

January 23, 1997

10:30 a.m.

I was on my way back to the Locanda Garibaldi with a box of chocolates tucked under my left arm, a bouquet of yellow tulips in my left hand, and a bouquet of red roses in my right. I walked with a spring in my step while singing “Sugar, Sugar” by the Archies. I knew I was being cheesy, but I didn’t care. I was too absurdly happy to concern myself with how ridiculous I must have looked to everyone I passed on the streets of Siena. Just as I reached the front entrance to our hotel, Taran emerged and almost walked into me. He looked me over and smiled at the spectacle I made, singing and bearing an armload of gifts into the hotel. “Are those for Evelyn?”

I blushed. “Yeah.”

“Things are going well then?”

“I think so. I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Good.” Taran rubbed his jaw, thoughtfully. “There’s a lot of lonely, brilliant students in Geneseo with 4.0s. They’ve prepared all their lives for their careers. Romance? Not so much. I was worried you two would fail to mesh or push each other away. I’m so glad to be wrong!”

“I’m glad you’re wrong, too! Man, I was *super* lonely, and I only had a 3.34 GPA!”

“You two had your first date already?” he asked.

“We did. It went well!”

“You’re making me remember my first date with my wife. We went to see *Billy Jack Goes to Washington*. Awful movie. Wonderful date. You two enjoy yourselves.” Taran beamed at me, waved goodbye, and headed off to run some errands.

I stepped inside the Locanda Garibaldi and found Tuesday sitting alone at one of the restaurant tables, doing homework. Tuesday smiled at the flowers. “Evelyn will love those.”

“I hope she likes the roses.” I held out the bouquet of yellow tulips. “These are for you.”

Tuesday looked up at the Tulips in muted surprise. “For me? Why?”

“Even though I never intended to tease or insult you, my intentions don’t matter. What mattered is I hurt you. I’m genuinely sorry about that. I didn’t mean it, but I still should have behaved better. That’s why these flowers are for you. I swear they are a gesture of apology and not a romantic overture. Scout’s honor. Nevertheless, I’ll understand if you don’t want them.”

Tuesday reached up and accepted the flowers. “They’re lovely.”

“A couple of the other bouquets were a little wilted. I thought this one was fresh. I tried.”

Tuesday became pensive. “I’m sorry about all that stuff you went through in the band room that time. You know, that whole scene with Marina and Eric carrying you around. I know Eric was trying to help you, and I wanted to help you, but it was so not good.”

I waved the awkward scene from our past away. “Ah, fuhgeddaboudit. I wouldn’t have known what to do in your shoes, either.”

“I almost forgot that all that was about Bobby spreading stupid rumors about Marina. And now I’m dating him. Why? I have no idea. I shouldn’t be with him after what he did to her.”

“I guess that was a long time ago and some people grow and change?” I asked.

She looked the flowers over wistfully. “Bobby hasn’t bought me any flowers yet.”

The remark made me nervous. “I didn’t buy these for you to cause Bobby problems. I just thought I owed you an apology. Maybe he hasn’t had the opportunity yet?”

“You found one.” Tuesday held aloft the flowers I just gave her.

“I’m just glad you like them. I didn’t want to disturb you or your homework.” I started towards the stairs.

Tuesday’s voice stopped me. “Do you think Bongo Guy buys flowers for his girlfriends?”

I smiled, remembering him toking up inside his igloo. “He gives them weed, at any rate.”

Tuesday turned grave. “Maybe I should go with Bongo Guy.”

I held up my hands in surrender. “I’m gonna stay out of this one, if it’s okay with you.”

"It is," said Tuesday. "Hey, thanks for the flowers, Damien. They made my day."

We laughed together.

I stepped onto the third floor as Purple Sarah emerged from the room she shared with Evelyn. "Damien!" When she called out my name, I remembered I didn't like to hear it shouted. It made me think of all the times people shouted "Damien!" before being murdered by Satan in the *Omen* movies. One woman even yelled it before publicly hanging herself at a kid's birthday party. Sarah eyed my flowers and chocolates. "Those are for Evelyn?"

Her expression made me uneasy. "Oh, no. What's wrong?"

Sarah glanced back at the closed door of her room. Through the clouded window, we could see Evelyn dressing and putting make-up on. Sarah grabbed me by the elbow and led me towards the stairwell. Lowering her voice, she said, "Last night, Evelyn was so excited you kissed her, she couldn't sleep. So, we got dressed and took a walk really late at night to talk about you. And it was nice for a while. But now I'm so sorry we went out, because it screwed everything up for you."

I felt cold. "Oh?"

Sarah closed her eyes and kept speaking. "This Italian paratrooper saw us by the D'Uomo and came up to us. He was interested in both of us, but Evelyn looks like Claudia Schiffer, so he settled on her pretty quick. He was insanely handsome. Like . . . insane."

"Well, shit," I murmured.

"For a while, it was the three of us talking and joking, but I felt myself getting frozen out. I tried to get her away from him a few times, but she gave me this look like, 'I know you're friends with Damien, but stop messing this up for me.' So, I just came back here and left them there by the D'Uomo. I wasn't even two yards away when they started making out in front of it."

"That is an extremely cool place to make out. It has a powerful romantic ambiance."

"When I talked to her this morning, she said they stayed out late together. She's putting on her face now to go see him again. His name is Giuliano."

“Giuliani? There’s gratitude for you! After Staten Island got him into Gracie Mansion?”

“Giuliano.” Sarah looked at me pleadingly. “Listen, I know you just got her flowers and chocolates, but if I were you, I wouldn’t go in there. I’ve been talking to her, and she’s all into Giuliano now. And she’s been saying weird stuff about you, like you reference movies too often, and used suspicious Cary Grant quotes when flirting with her.”

“Oh, I never quote Cary Grant,” I said. “A man’s got to know his limitations. But I do reference movies too often. She’s got me nailed to the wall.”

“She says she thinks you’re a seducer and your emotions aren’t real. Don’t take it too seriously. It’s baloney she’s using to justify running off with Giuliano because she feels guilty.”

“She doesn’t trust me? But this paratrooper dude is above suspicion?”

“And please don’t feel bad about Giuliano. There’s no shame in losing to him. He’s dead sexy. Like, a ten out of ten. I mean, whoa. He’s . . . *damn!* He’s super hot. Super hot.”

“Well, thank you for letting me know that,” I said. “It puts things in perspective. Man, I tell you what, these military guys sure love putting me firmly in my place. Firmly. In my place.”

“I’m only telling you this, so you know Evelyn wasn’t out to hurt you. I mean, you shoulda seen this guy. Giuliano was Count Dracula sexy. He had this need to make love that you could feel crackling in the air around him. His Italian male sexual hunger was *overpowering*.”

“Italian guys can be like that,” I admitted. “Or so I’ve read.”

“His godly handsomeness combined with that Italian hunger? No woman could resist it.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I mean, it sounds feasible.”

“Just, please don’t be too hard on her,” Sarah said. “And don’t allow her to walk all over you or talk crap about you being phony just to get herself off the hook.”

“Okay, okay.” I looked down at the roses and chocolates and had no idea what to do with them. “I better get this over with.” I handed Sarah the chocolates. “I want you to have these. You’re a good friend and a good person. Also, dropping truth bombs on a buddy is never fun.”

Sarah took them and grimaced. “Are you sure?”

“Please. Enjoy the chocolates. You’ve earned them for doing everything you could to help me.” I inclined my head towards Evelyn’s room. “I’m going to go give her the roses now.”

“I wish you wouldn’t go in there.”

“I have to try,” I said. “If I don’t even try, I’ll make the same mistake my grandfather made. I’m going to go for the ‘No.’ Of course, that means making things extra hard for us both.”

“If this ends badly, remember you still have friends.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen, when we get back to Geneseo for the spring term, me and the STD girls will take you out and toast your coolness. We’ll go to Nick Tahou Hots to grab us some Garbage Plates, then hit the bars and see Spirit of the West play a set.”

When she said this, I really did feel like smiling. “Now that’s a date I’d be honored to go on with y’all! That sounds very, very fun.”

“Then you better come out with us! Don’t go back to hiding in your Hobbit hole.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry. I’ll go with you.” I paused, then looked fearfully at the door to Evelyn’s room. “I feel like Billy Martin about to walk into George Steinbrenner’s office.”

“Yeah.”

“Little baseball joke.” I cleared my throat. “So, this Giuliano guy is really mega hot?”

“Ten out of ten.” Sarah was crying for me now. It wasn’t every day someone cried for me. That meant a lot. It really did. I was still in shock, so I couldn’t cry. I think she cried for me because I wasn’t able to do it for myself.

“Oh, well. Thanks for worrying about me. You’re a sweet kid.” I chucked Sarah under the chin. Sighing, I walked up to the door to Evelyn’s room with the bouquet of roses held up. I turned back to Sarah and mouthed, “This is gonna suck!” Then I knocked on the door.

Purple Sarah held her breath and closed her eyes as Evelyn let me in the room.

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Byron nursed a pint of Guinness as I downed an amaretto on the rocks. We sat on the barstools in the Irish Pub in Siena, talking to the sandy-haired barkeep, Cormack. I had gotten off on the wrong foot with the man by toasting to the six counties under John Bull's tyranny, adding, "Twenty-six plus six equals one!" Cormack informed me, patiently, that seeing a Daniel Day-Lewis movie about the Troubles did not give me the right to make such toasts, so I apologized. I had already seen *In the Name of the Father*, and was one year away from seeing *The Boxer*, a painfully sexy "forbidden romance" movie about Daniel Day-Lewis' title character falling in love with Emily Watson, who plays the wife of a jailed IRA terrorist. Something about Daniel Day-Lewis' dilemma in that film spoke to the core of my being. Still, Cormack was right. I was no expert on the Troubles before or after seeing either *The Boxer* or *In the Name of the Father*.

Cormack said, "Ireland was the laboratory for imperialism. The British subjugated us first and learned how to be evil colonialists on Irish soil. They took that model and exported it around the world. As Ireland fell, so fell the globe, under the boot of the British Empire. Now, Britain's baton has been passed to America. That's why the world is the way it is. So, let's not be glib about the Troubles, my friend, because Ireland's chains are the chains we all wear."

"My friend here isn't totally hopeless," Byron said conspiratorially to Cormack. "He knows his Irish drinking songs, if you'd like to hear him regale us."

"We need a full pub for that kinda thing," Cormack said.

"He's not interested," I said.

Byron slapped me on the shoulder. "Come on! Give us 'Patriot Games.'"

I eyed Cormack warily. "No, anything but that one." I drank down my amaretto, gestured for another one, and launched into my best mimicry of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem singing "Jug of Punch." After a verse, Byron joined in. Another verse later, Cormack surrendered and added his voice to what was now a trio. We finished loud and strong, and Cormack chuckled. "That's not a bad mimic job. I have the same vinyl. But you should sing from the

heart and not just do impressions and Irish accents,” he advised me.

“There’s a lot of things I need to do from the heart,” I admitted.

“That song rules with an iron fist!” yelled Byron.

“Alright, now,” Cormack said. “I’m not surprised me and your friend know the lyrics to this song, but what’s with Mr. Italian American knowing Irish drinking songs so well?”

“Dad loves them,” I said. “And most of my best friends growing up have been Irish.”

Byron thumped his chest. “Like me!”

I looked at him sideways. “I thought you were Scottish. Your whole *Braveheart* thing?”

“Half and half,” Byron said. “Believe it or not, I’m a direct descendant of Brian Boru.”

“You, too?” I asked. “I think James told me he’s one, also.”

Cormack raised his hand. “I, too, am a direct descendant of Brian Boru.”

“No way!” I said. “Would you believe, I’m a direct descendant of Giuseppe Garibaldi?”

“You are?” asked Byron.

“No, I’m just kidding.”

Cormack frowned. “Fine. Make fun. But I really am a direct descendant of Brian Boru.”

“That Brian Boru guy must have been some playa.”

Byron raised his Guinness to toast me. “Not half the playa you’re gonna be in the nursing home when you get old.”

I clinked my amaretto glass against his Guinness. “You said it. That’s gonna be my prime. When I’m eighty-five, I’m doing all the Golden Girls in my retirement community in Ocala, Florida! I just have to spend all the years in-between now and then watching the same twenty-six seasons of *Doctor Who* serials on endless loop. Got a lot of time to kill!”

Cormack gestured to the Wonder Woman t-shirt I had on. “I’m not sure that attire bodes well for your future career as a geriatric philanderer.”

I was very proud of my brand-new t-shirt, which featured a striking José Luis García-López portrait of Diana from the cover of last year’s *Wonder Woman* #118. I had changed into it just after Evelyn gave me my walking papers and wore it in honor of Byron taking me out to the

pub to cheer me up. “Wonder Woman is my buddy. Even if nobody else loves me, Diana does.”

“I’ve got bad news for you,” said Cormack. “She’s a lesbian. No matter how much you may want her, you can’t have her.”

I shrugged. “So, what else is new?”

Byron interjected. “Just so you know, Cormack, Damien’s level of affection for a woman is not limited by his estimation of the likelihood she’ll go to bed with him.”

“A damn good thing, too, *for obvious reasons*. Ha!” I looked sideways at Byron. “You’re sounding like me.”

“You’re a bad influence,” Byron grumbled, good-naturedly.

I smiled. “I love Diana. Now, you may ask, what percentage of each of C.S. Lewis’ ‘four loves’ do I feel for her? Affection, Friendship, Romantic, or Charity? Do I draw a pie chart? Who cares? It’s nobody’s business but mine. ‘Sides, I don’t think much on it, or worry much about it. Neither should you, she, or anyone. That’s my final word on the subject. Boom!”

Byron turned serious. “Okay, let’s have it. What happened with Evelyn Krueger?”

I grunted. “I don’t wanna talk about that in front of Cormack.”

Cormack laughed.

“Come on,” Byron said. “Cormack doesn’t care.”

“He’s right,” said Cormack. “I don’t care.”

I laughed, despite myself. “Oh, you know how it is: I took a rowboat to China to see her, but she sent me away because she was too busy doing her laundry.”

“I want to know what happened to you, not Matthew Wilder!” Byron yelled.

“She thinks I’m like Chauncey Gardner: a guy who grew up watching too much television who poses as being wise by quoting stuff he saw on VHS at an impressionable age. I’m deceptively charming because I borrow the charisma of better people, like Groucho Marx and Bill Murray, and quote them without attribution. Also, I am not really dating her because I love her, but because I’m a writer looking for material for a future book or screenplay.”

Byron banged his fist on the table. “Where does she get all that shit from?”

I stared at my own fingernails. They were bitten down as far as they could go, so there was nothing left for me to gnaw on. “Insightful and unnerving. Still, I’d like to think she’s being a little hard on me. I hope she’s not God’s prosecution attorney when I stand before the pearly gates, let me tell you. I’d have a hell of a time refuting any of that.”

Byron growled. “I don’t know how *anyone* could accuse you of being insincere or phony. What else did she say? You’re not enough into Spider-Man? You’re too into football and Tex-Mex? You don’t take a strong enough stance against fraternities? You’re soft on Bill Clinton?”

“Yeah, but it is possible she has some kind of point. I can’t dismiss it all outright.”

“You mean you aren’t *really* living your life? You’re doing research for a screenplay?”

“Of course, I’m living my life!” I chuckled. “Still, I understand why she’s worried. I am a writer. I gave her a ‘That’s a great idea!’ look, and she almost punched me. Then I said to her, ‘If I ever write a story about us, I’ll protect your identity by naming you after a villain from a horror movie. Or *Masters of the Universe*. Or both.’ This did not reassure her. Of course, I’ve been in a lot of creative writing classes with short stories that are clearly just revenge hatchet jobs on a recent ex. I better be fairer to her than that, or my story will be just like any one of those. I’ll just be writing: ‘My girl kissed an Italian paratrooper and all I got was this dumb t-shirt’ stories.”

Byron blinked. “What was that about an Italian paratrooper?”

“Never mind about the paratrooper. The important thing is, I don’t want to just mock her in print, you know? I gotta be fair. If I do decide to write my heart-wrenching memoirs.”

Cormack chuckled. “Heart-wrenching memoirs? You look like someone who’s had the easiest life ever! Has anything *ever* gone wrong for you? Big softie leading a charmed life!”

Byron laughed. “Oh, just mock her. Go ahead. Serves her right for messing with you. You really going to write this screenplay she’s prophesized?”

I shook my head. “Be a boring fucking movie. Tobey Maguire

wandering New York and Italy not getting laid in . . . drumroll . . . *The Forty-Year Old Virgin!* Just imagine a cinematic masterpiece produced by Harvey Weinstein, written by Richard Russo, and directed by Noah Baumbach. A celebration of First World Problems at their finest. Also, a slam dunk for the National Organization of Women's 2016 Film of the Year award for fostering much-needed sympathy for the underfucked straight white man."

"This is the world's smallest violin playing just for you," said Cormack.

I laughed. "Exactly! High-stakes drama. Who cares about the Armenian genocide, child-brides, and female genital mutilation when Damien doesn't have a widdle girl of his very own!"

"Could be a great art film," Byron said. "*Yakking in New Yawk*. Put John Turturro and Parker Posey in it!"

"You know who Jack Black is?" Cormack asked me. "He could be you."

Byron and I shook our heads.

"Never mind," said Cormack. "He hasn't made it big yet."

The fancasting reminded me of something disturbing. "Evelyn also said this: 'I bet that every time you meet someone new, you think of an actor they look like who could play them in a movie made about your life. I bet the first time you met Byron, you thought he looked like Billy Baldwin, and the first time you met me, you thought, "Oh, look! Dowdy Claudia Schiffer!"' That was frighteningly accurate. It made me feel like I'm a bad person."

Byron scratched his chin. "One: You're not the only one who does that. Two: The reason she was able to pin down who you'd cast for us so accurately is we actually do look a lot like Billy Baldwin and Claudia Schiffer. So, what she said isn't so much shocking, as true."

Cormack gave Byron a thumbs up. "You do have a Billy thing going on."

"More importantly, did you get any action before she bounced you?" Byron asked me.

"I suppose." I drank more amaretto.

"Which base?" Byron asked.

I waved him off. "I don't like sports."

Cormack chuckled. "First or second. Tops."

"The coolest part of our relationship was when she serenaded me with the theme to *Octopussy*," I said, lying brazenly, and not expecting to be believed.

Byron leaned towards Cormack. "I say second."

I punched the bar. "No, it was first! It was first. Let's move on, huh? Please?"

"Okay," said Byron.

My mood turned the bleakest it had been for many years. "Byron, what major historical milestone do you think will happen first? A) The polar ice caps melt. B) America gets a cool, Sidney-Poitier-reminiscent Black president. C) I finally get to have sex."

Byron didn't laugh. "That's some rough shit, man. I'm hoping those things happen in the opposite order you said them in, for all sorts of reasons."

"My money is on the cool Black guy," I said. "Mostly because social justice is important to me. And if Black people have to wait for me to get laid before they're allowed to have a Black man in the White House, they're looking to wait a hell of a long time. At this rate? 2037!"

"You just picked the wrong girl to chase. You need to ask out more people and pick better possible matches."

I sighed. "Evelyn really is a cool customer. I wonder if it's because she's German. I'm better off chasing after a passionate Italian girl, right?"

Cormack tutted. "Oh, no. That would be a colossal waste of time. Italian women are very difficult to get into bed. They want you to meet their families first."

I laughed. "Ironically, I'm difficult to get into bed! Just ask the girls in my art class. Ha!"

"What you boys need," Cormack continued, "is to go to the Netherlands. The liberalism there is fantastic. Women open their legs over there for nothing. You can't walk down the street at night without getting laid six ways from Sunday by total strangers. Here? Forget about it. I've had so little sex here these last few months, I'm chomping at the bit to go back to the Netherlands. And I thought I'd seen the last of Italy when I opened this place last year, but we had that emergency and I had to come racing back."

“What emergency?” Byron asked.

“I go around the world opening genuine Irish pubs in all sorts of countries. I opened this one and everything seemed fine. Then we found out Italians don’t know how to drink. They look at alcohol like Americans look at soda: a drink at mealtime. They don’t go to pubs. So, I have to come back to change the culture. And I get a great idea: I’ll lower the price of the large beer to match the price of the medium. Trick them into drinking more. Guess what fucking happens?”

I said, “They ordered the medium drink.”

Byron looked stricken, “They didn’t!”

Cormack’s frown couldn’t get any deeper. “They order a *medium* drink! I tell them a large is the same price. *They stick with the medium!* What’s wrong with Italians? No beer. No sex. Lotsa worshipping the Virgin Mary. Lotsa Saint Sebastian getting penetrated by arrows artwork. A whole country of repressed lunatics whose sexual frustration makes them violent!”

“You’re not totally wrong,” I said. “Though we did produce Casanova, so I just thought we were very physical people. Earthy. All about food, sex, and fisticuffs.”

Cormack shook his head. “Italy. Who needs it? Go to the Netherlands. Free education. Free healthcare. Full employment. Pussy for everyone. Wages of socialism right there.”

I handed my empty glass back for more amaretto. “Sign me up.”

“I thought you were a Republican,” Byron said.

“Free education? Free healthcare? Full employment? Pussy for everyone? I’m officially changing teams. I always suspected I was an anarcho-socialist. Now I know I am. The number one reason I’m unhappy is capitalism. I like to be a nice, educated, and peaceful person, and live in a beautiful, unpolluted environment. Capitalism encourages people to be cruel, stupid, warlike, and live in a polluted, impoverished hellscape. Well, fuck that noise.”

Byron looked thoughtful. “You’re officially all leftist now, huh?”

“I can’t go back now. Last night, Pat Buchanan got footage of Hillary and me having sex on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The secret it out.”

Byron groaned. "You and your weird dreams. That is so disgusting."

"Odd I'm dreaming about Hillary instead of Emma Thompson, but it makes some sense."

"You know who the first socialist was in history?" Cormack asked with a wry grin.

"Who?" Byron asked.

"Jesus Christ," Cormack and I said at the same time.

Byron raised his Guinness in the air, "Clothe the naked, feed the hungry, heal the sick, and turn the other cheek."

Cormack nodded in approval. "Now that's a real toast, right there."

"I do think I have two problems," I declared. "The first problem is America is too conservative. If it were a socialist country, I'd have a girlfriend by now. Capitalism is killing my sex life. Everyone is broke, everyone is angry, everyone is stupid, men and women hate each other, the races hate each other, the religions hate each other, and everyone has a gun, and no one is fucking any more. If America ever goes socialist, it'll be like heaven on Earth."

"Are you sure that's the problem?" Byron asked. "Because if you decide that, in your head, that lets you off the hook to even try, and you'll just give up. It is way simpler than that. Ask out more people. Stop cherry-picking, and picking rotten cherries, to boot."

"Well, you just put the curse of the Cat People on me! That's not gonna help. Making me fall for married broads! If anything happens to me remotely like what happened to Lancelot, I'm holding you personally responsible."

Byron took a sip from his Guinness. "You can't blame me for Arwen and Marina. They got married before I put the curse on you."

"How's about you take it off me anyway?"

Byron considered the option. "Nah."

"Well, fuck you, too. I bet my whole life, the same shit is going to happen to me over, and over, and over again. I'll be like John McClane in *Die Hard 2*. Every Christmas, I have to rescue Bonnie Bedelia from a new set of terrorists. Every year, I'll meet a new dream chick, and there will always be a new Rolf. Rolf is forever. Rolf is eternal. Rolf, Rolf, Rolf, Rolf, Rolf."

Byron had an epiphany: "Hey! Remember who plays the main

villain in *Die Hard 2*?”

I raised my amaretto glass in the air. “Franco Nero!”

Byron pounded back the rest on his Guinness and slammed the empty pint glass down on the bar. “Fucking Franco Nero!”

“New Guinness?” asked Cormack.

“Hells, yeah!” Byron nodded. “Listen, dude, just try harder and go out on the town more instead of staying in and watching movies. It isn’t rocket science.”

“Who’s gonna like me?” I asked, hopelessly. “My own people don’t like me. I’m not a real Italian and all real Italians can smell that on me. That’s the real stench. Italians can’t stand the smell of me, and no other race wants to go near me because I’m not one of them. New Yorkers are segregated by race. The Chinese stay in Chinatown, the Blacks stay in Harlem, the Italians are in Little Italy, the Hispanics are in Jackson Heights, the Germans are in Wall Street, the Jews have their designated neighborhoods — like Willowbrook — and I’m not at home in any of them. The walls are up and I have no way in. I hate walls. I fucking hate them. But there’s walls everywhere and they’re all closing in on me. Now, I’ve heard rumors of people successfully intermarrying and dating outside their people, but I don’t know if I’ve ever actually seen more than one or two mixed couples with my own eyes. I’m starting to doubt their existence. People seem to stay with their own people, and I have no people! I’m doomed to be alone, because I’m a fake Italian and I’ve never successfully asked anyone out from any other ethnicity.”

A voice came from the corner of the bar behind Byron and me. “May I ask what a ‘fake Italian’ is?” The speaker was a kindly, wizened old man with unkempt white hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and a closed-lipped, smiling face.

How long had he been there? “I’m fake. I don’t know the language. I live on Staten Island, which has more Italians on it than anywhere in the world but here, but I’m not like them and they don’t like me. Is it because they’re Sicilian and I’m Neapolitan? Am I too German? Too middle-class? We’re all Catholic! All Southern Italians! We should feel more solidarity than division. Why is it that I feel so separated from them?”

“What separates you?” the old man asked himself. “A language, for one thing. Italy was never meant to be one country. Venetians are one people. Florentines another. Neapolitans. Sicilians. Each group has its own languages, histories, foods, and personalities.”

“But what about efforts to unify Italy? What about Toscano?”

“Toscano?” the old man asked. “I guess we can give the Florentines credit for creating that common tongue because of the beauty of the literature of Dante. I’ll give them that. Of course, I don’t like to. I don’t like the Florentines. But Toscano is more of a literary and political exercise than a real unifying language. The Italians are as divided as ever.”

“Really?” I asked.

“You can’t think in terms of Italians or Italian Americans. There’s no such thing as Italians or Italian Americans. At best, you’re Neapolitan American and the others you’re talking about not relating to are Sicilian Americans. You can’t expect to have the same cultural values and personality as them. You’re not them. I’m not saying you’re better than them or they’re better than you. You’re just not as similar as you think you are. You can’t expect to feel an instant connection because you all like similar imported meats, cheeses, and pasta from Italy.”

I rubbed my jaw, thinking furiously about what he was saying. “I think the one thing I have in common with Staten Island Italians is we all like salami.”

“But that isn’t enough, is it? In the end, it is just something you buy in a store. It tastes great. It’s a product. It isn’t your heart or their hearts. Which of you is the real Italian? Are only Neapolitans real Italians, and the rest fake Italians? Are only Sicilian Americans real Italian Americans and the rest fake Italian Americans? Who’s ‘real’? Who’s ‘fake’? Who’s to say?”

I was at a loss. “I don’t know.”

The old man chuckled. “I just told you. There’s no such thing as a ‘real’ Italian. And if there were, you would make as good a claim to being a ‘real’ Italian as any, if not a better one.”

“That is very interesting,” Byron interjected.

“I’ve got no horse in this race,” Cormack said.

Byron gestured to the old man. “It is still a fundamentally interesting conversation.”

I asked Cormack for a refill on my amaretto. When I got one, I turned around on my stool to better face the old man. “How can you know I have a better claim to being Italian than most?”

“You’re an immigrant,” the old man said. “Or you’re descended from immigrants. You have the blood of immigrants in you. Their adventurous genes. Their thirst for a better life. Their drive to succeed. Their brazenness. Immigrants are always the best of their people because they are the ones with the guts to say, ‘Enough is enough. I won’t stand for this treatment anymore. I’m taking myself and my family out of this hell, and I’m going someplace new to build a fresh life for myself. I refuse to live under these circumstances for a minute longer.’ Think of the bravery it takes to make a stand like that! Who has the guts to leave their homeland? Go someplace where they don’t speak the language or have the same religion to forge a new life? To start a new family tree? Rewrite history? Only immigrants and refugees have those guts. Immigrants and refugees are more likely than anyone else to tell evil authority figures to go fuck themselves. That’s you. Your genes. Your blood. Your legacy.”

Outside of a couple of platitudes about heroism attached very specifically to Ellis Island immigrants in civics class or during a tour of Ellis Island itself, I had never once heard a kind word spoken about refugees or immigrants in my entire life. This old man’s perspective was astonishing, refreshing, and inspiring. I felt a swell of pride for my immigrant ancestors. “In America, we are taught that immigrants are too pathetic to love. They’re the dirty refuse from every other country. Uneducated, diseased welfare cases for the government to deal with. More mouths to feed that drain limited American resources. Terrorists and criminals from shithole countries. We are never, ever told they are brave, or honorable, or noble. And now we have a new 24-hour news channel dedicated solely to smearing Blacks and immigrants. It just debuted, and it is a God damn nightmare.”

The old Italian man who spoke perfect English without an accent shook his head with disgust. “The people who say those things are evil racists. They aren’t worth listening to. They have an agenda. White supremacy. Are you a white supremacist?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Then don’t think in terms of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ people. People aren’t ‘fake.’”

I arched my eyebrow at Byron. “Check it out! I’m *not* ‘fake.’”

“You’re not a fake Italian,” Byron said. “And your emotions aren’t fake either. I don’t know what Evelyn is smoking. Must have spent some time with Bongo Guy. Oh, yeah! I meant to ask you: since when is Bongo Guy going out with Tuesday? I just saw them together!”

“Are they? I think I know. I’ll tell you later.” I returned my attention to the old man. “That’s reassuring. I suppose I just want to feel some sort of connection. Like, I wish I spoke the language better, at the very least.”

“Oh, you don’t speak the language? Oh, that is so sad.” The old man mimicked crying and then stopped the mock tears abruptly. “Who cares?”

My eyes widened. “Who cares? Isn’t the language all that matters? That’s what separates the big time Italians from the people just messing around, right?”

The old man waved away the questions, disgusted. “You’re still caught up in the Real Italian/Fake Italian dichotomy. It’s nonsense. Let me tell you something. The average Italian who lives in Italy now and never left it — I don’t care if they’re Florentine, Milanese, or Venetian — does not have half the guts of the average Sicilian American, Neapolitan American or Friulian American. The average Italian didn’t have the guts to leave when things got bad in Italy. They stayed and sweat it out because they were too scared to leave. The American branches of the Italian people did have those guts. They left. So even if they Americanized, and enculturated, and forgot how to speak Italian, they are still the boldest and best of us. You may not speak Italian, but you are the best of Italy in your blood, in your passion, in your creativity. All American immigrants are the bravest of their people. They should all be celebrated. You are the best of Italy and the best of America. Don’t ever let anyone tell you that you are a fake American or fake Italian. There’s no such thing. Anyone who tells you any different is a liar.”

Cormack murmured to Byron, “Okay, I admit it. At some point, this got very interesting.”

Byron nodded.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“So,” the old man said, “you may have just had a sad breakup, but you are not unlovable. You just haven’t found the right girl. But finding someone to love is hard enough to do without putting on top of that pressure all these cultural anxieties that do not matter. ‘How can I ask this Italian girl out since she speaks the language and I don’t and she’s a “real” Italian and I’m not?’ Who needs nonsense like that rattling around in their heads? If that burden is holding you back, discard it. Purge it from your thoughts. And if you want to date someone who is not Italian — Black, Jewish, Russian, Inuit — don’t worry if their people, their family, their friends think you are not worthy of them because you have the wrong religion, ethnicity, or political party. If you meet the right girl, you will click, and all that nonsense will go away. Because it is all nonsense.”

Unless they stand to inherit a chocolate factory. But, yes. I drank down my next amaretto. “This is really refreshing.”

The old man smiled because he wasn’t sure if his words or the drink were refreshing. “In the end, we are all human and we are all going to die. We just need to be kind to one another and love one another while we are here. The rest is just noise and jingoism. Get it out of your head and don’t let it screw you up. Yes, New York is segregated. That is particularly galling since it is supposed to be the seat of freedom and tolerance in the world. But that’s not your fault. Be better than that and don’t let it hold you back. Disregard the clannishness. Don’t allow anyone to define you and circumscribe you. Be yourself. Don’t worry about being a ‘real’ American or a ‘real’ Italian or a ‘real’ Catholic or a ‘real’ college student or a ‘real’ whatever. Just be you. Imposter syndrome is artificially inserted into working-class people to keep them in their place. Forget about imposter syndrome. It goes hand-in-hand with racism and class warfare. Evil imperials make everyone less wealthy than them experience imposter syndrome so they can feel superior and hold onto power.”

“Fuhgeddaboudit,” I murmured. “I hate evil imperialist rich people.”

“Fucking pieces of shit!” Byron roared.

Cormack reached down and grabbed a fistful of his own crotch through his pants. “I got their imposter syndrome right here. Those rich fuckers can speak into the mic.”

“And once you are comfortable in your own skin, you won’t stink of need,” continued the old man. “You will have a new confidence, and that is something that women find attractive. You be you. Love will follow. But if you hate yourself, if you really think you are a ‘fake’ Italian, you will never be happy and you will never be able to make anyone else happy.”

I placed my glass on the counter and stood up. “That makes a whole lot of sense.”

“I’ve been around a while,” the old man said. “I’ve lived in Italy for twenty years, in America for twenty years, in Singapore for twenty years, and Antigua for twenty years. People are the same all the world over. The good people and the bad. There’s always racists running around telling people they aren’t human. Our job is to tell them to fuck off and die so the rest of us can live our lives in peace and love each other.”

“That’s some profound shit right there,” Cormack proclaimed.

“Amen,” said Byron.

I walked up to the old man with my hand outstretched. “I’m Damien.”

The old man took my hand and shook it firmly. “I’m Pietro.”

“It is a genuine pleasure to meet you,” Byron said to Pietro.

“I’m really glad you came in tonight to meet these guys, Mr. Capaldi,” Cormack said.

“Me, too,” said Pietro.

“I think you may have just solved the defining problem of my life for me,” I said.

“Only if you truly believe what I just told you and act on it,” Pietro said.

“I intend to,” I said with surprisingly firm, clear-eyed resolve — surprising considering how drunk I was by now.

“Good.”

I looked at Pietro again. “You really mean it?”

“What?”

"There's no such thing as a 'fake Italian,' but if there were such a thing as a 'real Italian,' I'd be an ideal candidate? Because I'm from immigrant stock, and the immigrants represent the best of the people they come from?"

"Your ancestors left their homeland and struck out on their own. The rest were too chicken. They stayed behind. You have the DNA of adventurers in your veins."

I beamed at Byron. "I have the DNA of an adventurer."

"And I have the DNA of a Scottish swashbuckler!" Byron cried. "I knew I was descended from William Wallace!"

"You two are joking, but I meant every word I said," Pietro cut in.

"Oh, I'm not joking," Byron replied. "And neither is Damien." Byron nodded at Pietro. "Thank you for fixing Damien. He's been a nervous wreck for years."

"I've been a nervous wreck all my life," I replied.

Pietro smiled. "Non fa niente. I'm happy to help."

"I can't believe I bumped into you!" I whooped. "It feels like Jesus or Gandalf or Doctor Who sent you to me to fix me. You're my *deus ex machina*! If this were in a movie, I wouldn't believe it. On the other hand, I was due for some good luck, for God's sake. In coming to this bar tonight — thanks to Byron's annoying insistence — I got to meet you and have this huge, cathartic breakthrough! I was finally the right guy in the right place and at the right time!" I eyed Pietro suspiciously. "In all seriousness: Are you *actually* Doctor Who? Like, are you really a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey in the flesh?"

"No," said Pietro. "But it's nice of you to think so. Besides, I don't think an Italian has ever played the Doctor."

"Hope springs eternal!" I laughed. "Anyway, more importantly, who needs counseling when you're around to talk to!"

Byron's amused concern for me was turning slowly into relief and pride. I was drunker than he had ever seen me, and yet I stood up straighter than I had before. I spoke more firmly and naturally in my baritone. I might have even been developing a confident strut. "Well? How do you feel, right now, Damien? You look like you're in a much better mood."

"How do I feel?" I flashed Byron the brightest, toothiest smile I had ever given. "Fantastic! Cormack! I need to celebrate! And I need to buy my friends Byron and Pietro some booze. You with me?"

"Alright!" cried Byron.

Pietro inclined his head in thanks. "I'd be honored to share a drink with you all."

"Sure, sure," Cormack laughed. "What would you like?"

I remembered that Evelyn had no time for my constant movie references. She thought that, each time I made them, I was hiding behind pop culture and undercutting the genuine emotional power of the experience. Still, at that moment, I found the perfect movie to quote to express the joy I was feeling: *Withnail and I*.

I stood heroically at the center of the bar and bellowed cheerfully at Cormack: "We want the finest wines available to humanity! We want them here, and we want them now!"