

Love, Lies, and Lattes

Bonus Content

By Karen Cimms

In the book world we have a phrase: *Kill your darlings*. What it means is that sometimes an author must excise precious words, scenes, or flowery prose from their book. As difficult as it may be, there are valid reasons for this. The words or scenes might be confusing to the reader or don't work within the book for some reason. Sometimes, especially in my case, it's because the book is just too dang long and something's got to go.

As painful as it was for me, it was necessary at the time for me to murder the darlings I've resurrected here for you.

The good news is that now I can share them with you, and that makes me very happy.

The first scene takes place before Franky meets Aiden. The scene begins in the Marchesi kitchen as Franky tells her parents she's moving out of the family home in Bensonhurst and in with Erika on the Upper West Side. It originally began right after Nonna offers Franky's mother a nut or *noce*.

Enjoy.

BEFORE AIDEN

Franky

A gleam appeared in my mother's eye. "And what about Gino?" she asked, as if she held a magic trump card that would keep me from moving to Manhattan.

My father gave her a quick shake of his head. My parents loved Gino DeLuca. I, however, did not.

"What about Gino?" I asked.

My father's lips were clamped in a thin, straight line. My mother, however, looked like she could barely contain herself.

"What about Gino?" Even I heard the panic in my voice.

Nonna held a hand in my direction. "*Noce?*"

"Ma?"

"Sophia." My father hissed at her between clenched teeth. "*Ora non! Dovrebbe essere una sorpresa!*"

I wanted to throw up. “What’s supposed to be a surprise?”

Ignoring my father, my mother answered smugly. “Gino asked your father for your hand in marriage, and he said yes. He’s going to propose Christmas Eve.”

“Sophia!”

I nearly upended my chair. “Why would you do that?” I shouted. “I’m not in love with Gino. I don’t even like him.”

“What are you talking about?” my father demanded. “He comes here at least once a week.”

“So does the garbage man! If he asked to marry me would you tell him yes too?” I shouldn’t have yelled at my parents, but I couldn’t help myself. They were lucky I wasn’t screaming. “Oh my god!” I started to pace. “Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.”

Three heads followed my path from one side of the kitchen to the other—one annoyed, one clucking her tongue, and one surprisingly crestfallen. It wasn’t like my father to second-guess himself.

“I’m not marrying Gino. Like I said: I don’t like him.”

“Pssh. What’s not to like?” My mother waved her hand, as if getting me to change my mind would be as simple as telling Gino to change the cologne he wears or style his hair differently and I’d suddenly come to my senses.

“There’s a lot of things not to like. For starters, he’s a misogynist.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scoffed. “He’s a plumber. Not a massagist.”

My father, who some days, like today, could be the leader of the local chapter of misogynists, shrugged. I bent over until my forehead rested on the kitchen table.

“No,” I said, speaking to the tops of my thighs. “Not a *massage therapist*. A misogynist. A misogynist is someone who dislikes or disrespects women.”

“He’s a homosexual?” Papa lowered his voice to a whisper.

If I started packing now, I could be on my way to Erika’s in just a couple hours. Better yet, I could leave now and just buy new things when I get there. I don’t need much.

Then again...

“Yes,” I said, rising from my chair and throwing my brother under the bus as collateral damage. “Gino’s gay. Haven’t you noticed the way he looks at Tony? He never looked at me that way. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. Maybe that’s why Tony and Kelly broke up. In

fact, I'm pretty sure I heard Gino and Tony talking about finding an apartment together." I held my hands out at my sides. "Just goes to show, you never know."

My father's eyes grew as large as two tangerines.

"But Gino's a plumber," Mama mumbled. Her earlier fire was all but gone.

I shrugged. "Go figure."

Christmas Eve Mass at St. Francis Cabrini had always been the best part of the holidays for me—at least once I stopped believing in Santa Claus and waking up at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning. More than a dozen evergreens lined the front of the church, decorated in tiny white lights and shiny red glass balls. Red and white poinsettias were clustered in front of the altar. And the choir sang some of my favorite carols while we waited for Mass to start.

All was calm; all was bright...until it wasn't.

A procession of altar servers made their way down the main aisle, accompanied by the choir's rendition of "Angels We Have Heard on High," and followed by Father Joe, leaving a trail of burning incense in his wake, as well as Gino DeLuca.

There was a slight commotion at the end of the pew, as Gino tried to squeeze past my father—who it seemed had forgotten to let Gino know my hand belonged to me and only me, given his unexpected and unwelcome appearance.

"Hey, Mr. M, Mrs. M," Gino said, not bothering to lower his voice, earning him a hard stare from Mrs. Russo who was sitting in front of us and a loud shush from Mrs. Esposito, who sat beside her.

Mama glared at him, but I was pretty sure it was for a different reason, as she rose and inserted herself between me and my brother, forcing Gino to pass me and squeeze between me and the woman sitting to my right.

Once settled, he grabbed my hand. "Hey, babe."

I yanked my hand back. "What're you doing here?"

"I needed to see you. You haven't answered any of my calls. Besides, this is my church too."

“Did the fact that I’m ignoring you not send a clear enough message that I don’t want to see you or talk to you?”

“Nah. I figured you was just busy. Ya know. Christmas and all.”

“Shh!” the woman next to Gino hissed.

“Sorry, Mrs. Bonifacio. That toilet still runnin’?”

“Not now, Gino,” she scolded. “We’re in church.”

“Yeah, right. Sorry.”

Idiota. This man was dumber and denser than a box of rocks.

He turned back to me and continued as if we were sitting in my living room. “Anyways, I been calling you. I got somethin’ I need to ask you. I figured now’s as good a time as any. At least you can’t get away from me in church, right?”

Wanna bet?

It didn’t seem to have occurred to him that a woman trying to get away from you might not be someone you should propose to. Then again, it was Gino.

“No.”

“No it’s not a good time?”

“Shh!” More parishioners joined Mrs. Bonifacio, Mrs. Esposito, and Mrs. Russo that time.

Gino pressed his finger to his lips. “Sorry.”

He was quiet through the psalms and the gospel, but the minute the organ swelled with the offertory hymn, he was at it again.

“So listen,” he said. “I’m thinkin’ it’s time we make it official.”

“Oh my God. No. Stop. Please.” I tried to whisper, I did. But it was impossible.

“Whaddaya mean ‘no?’ I didn’t ask you anything yet.”

“For God’s sake, Gino—”

Papa jumped from his seat and waved his arms like he was guiding a 747 into the gate at JFK. “Enough! *Basta!*” he bellowed. “You cannot marry my daughter! I changed my mind.”

The organ stopped. Heads swiveled sharply in our direction. And the entire congregation went silent. No one coughed or sneezed. Even fussy babies and cranky children decided what was going on in the back of the church was far more interesting.

“Or my son!” Papa added.

Oh shit.

“What?” both Gino and Tony shouted at the same time.

I slid down in the pew and slouched as low as I could go. For the first time in my life, I wished I was shorter.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Marchesi?” Father Joe asked from the lectern, his amplified voice echoing inside the cavernous church. Those who hadn’t known who was causing the commotion in the back, had to know by now.

My father muttered an apology and tried to sit, but Mama reached around my brother and gave him a sharp poke. “*Partiamo!*” She flapped a hand and hissed at him between her teeth.

“Go where?”

“Out. Go!”

I wanted to leave too, trust me, but it would’ve been better if we’d waited until Father Joe had resumed his sermon and the congregation had turned back toward the front. We ended up slinking out like a bunch of heathens who didn’t know how to behave in church.

We’d just about cleared the large oak doors in the back of the church, when Gino asked loudly, his voice echoing in the stillness just before the door closed with a quiet thump, “What the hell do you mean, I can’t marry your son?”

I didn’t need to worry about moving in with Erika. When my brother found out what I’d done, he was going to kill me.

Since Tony had only just started speaking to me again after that little misunderstanding on Christmas Eve, we pushed the date for my move to the Upper West Side until the Sunday after New Year's. The extra time allowed me to do something I'd been dreading—apologize to Gino.

While it would be easier to do it over the phone, or better yet, by text, it wasn't the proper way to handle it. I put it off as long as I could. Tomorrow night, I'd officially be a Manhattanite, which meant tonight, I had to make amends.

After dinner, while my parents and Nonna watched television, I bundled up for the four-block walk to Gino's house. I'd been hoping to slip out unnoticed, but Papa heard the door open.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I need to run a quick errand. I won't be long."

Mama sat up; worry stamped across her face. "It's dark out!"

"It's not even seven o'clock. I'll be right back."

She nudged my father. "Anthony. Take her."

Already exasperated, I let out a loud sigh. "You know, after tonight you won't know when I come in or go out. I'm a big girl, remember?"

"Do you think you're helping your case?" Mama asked, miffed.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath. "No. But I'm only going a few blocks. I need to apologize to Gino."

"For what?" Papa demanded.

"For humiliating him in church, although I think a good chunk of that falls on you."

"Scusa?" My mother reminded me with just one word whose fault it really was.

"All the more reason I need to apologize. I won't be long. I just want to say I'm sorry."

My parents exchanged glances. "If you're not home in twenty minutes, your father is going out to look for you."

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

I stood on the stoop of Gino's parent's house, my finger poised over the doorbell, trying to build up the nerve to push it.

"Franky?"

Gino stood on the sidewalk behind me, his arm casually thrown around the shoulders of Angela Rosetti.

That didn't take long.

"If you came to tell me you changed your mind, it's too late. I'm with Angie now, right, babe?"

With a loud sniff, she wrapped both arms around Gino's waist. "That's right." Her voice was so nasal it hurt my ears.

"Um, no. I came to apologize for what happened in church on Christmas Eve. While it still wasn't the right place to, ya know, do what you were planning to do, I may have overreacted."

"Yeah, well."

"And I'm sorry I made my parents think you're gay."

"What?" Angela looked like she'd swallowed her gum. "I didn't know you was gay."

"Hey, baby." He nuzzled her ear and her neck. "You know I ain't gay, right?"

She pulled back and stared at him for a few beats. "I didn't think so."

"I'm not." Gino turned his attention to me. "Is there anything else, Franky? Angie and I got plans."

"Nope," I said, coming down the steps. "Just wanted to apologize."

"See ya round, Franky," Gino called after me as I passed him and Angela on my way to the sidewalk.

I gave him a casual wave and tried not to skip. "You bet."

That had gone much better than I dared hope.

This next section includes a scene that was killed off after Aiden and Franky meet and are now a couple, although still hiding their relationship because of his contractual obligations to remain half of America's Sweethearts.

Aiden, wanting to introduce Franky and her family to his famous Oscar-winning parents, reserves a table at what he believes to be the best Italian restaurant in New York. Dinner didn't exactly go as planned.

This is the only time you'll get to meet Aiden's parents.

Buon appetito!

AFTER AIDEN

Aiden

My parents flew into town to catch the show. It was the perfect time for them to meet Franky. And since I wanted to make a good impression on her parents, also invited her family to join us for dinner at Encore, one of Manhattan's most exclusive Italian restaurants.

Big mistake.

I made reservations for seven o'clock Sunday evening. The time was typically early for my parents, who dined sometimes as late as ten or eleven given their schedules. It was also pretty late for Franky's family, who usually sat down to dinner at one or two in the afternoon, which was lunchtime as far as I was concerned.

Encore was located on the top floor of the Solomon Building. Glass walls on all four sides afforded three-hundred-and-sixty-degree views of Manhattan, including the Hudson River and Central Park. I'd requested a table on the Hudson side so we could watch the sunset, which according to my calculations, should happen in the next twenty minutes or so.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Franky said as the elevator sped to the sixtieth floor.

“What do you mean?”

“Our families meeting like this. First of all, they’re going to think something’s going on between us—”

I pulled her against me and buried my nose in her neck, breathing in the sweet scent of vanilla. “Something *is* going on between us.”

“You know what I mean.”

Kissing up to the tender spot behind her ear, I chuckled when I heard a tiny mewl. She loved it when I kissed her there.

“And then there’s our parents. Yours are ultra-sophisticated and mine are immigrants. With accents. Nonna doesn’t even speak English.”

“My parents are not ultra-sophisticated. They’re people. Like your parents.”

Her forehead scrunched. “And what if they don’t like me.”

I captured her earlobe between my teeth. “Then I’ll make them pay for dinner.”

She pushed against me, putting an end to my nibbling. “I’m serious.”

“My parents will love you, and if they don’t, it won’t change how I feel about you, and isn’t that all that matters?”

She was thinking too hard about that.

“Do your parents love me?” I asked.

Her answer came quickly. “Probably not.”

Seriously? “What do you mean probably not? What’s not to love?”

Judging by her frown and the furrowing of her eyebrows, I was veering off topic. Besides, did it matter if they *loved* me? We hadn’t even said that to each other. I needed to get her back on track and not worrying about whose parents loved/liked whom, so I kissed her. Hard. Hard enough to lose myself in the taste of her, the feel of her generous breasts against my chest, the silky hair spilling over my fingers—

The sound of exaggerated throat clearing brought me back to earth, or at least to the sixtieth floor and into the foyer of Encore, which afforded me a clear shot across the restaurant and the gawking faces of both sets of parents and one smirking grandmother.

“Excuse us,” I said to the annoyed couple waiting to board the elevator as I tucked my arm around Franky’s waist and directed her toward our table.

“Oh, God,” she muttered. “We’re late.”

“We’re fine. It’s called making an entrance.”

Thanks to daily crunches and sit ups, it barely hurt at all when she pinched my waist.

“You’re all here,” I announced. “Wonderful. Sorry if we’re a little late.”

“No problem,” my mother said at the same time Franky’s mother announced that we were fifteen minutes late.

I directed my best smile at Mrs. Marchesi. “Please. Forgive me. My driver hit a little traffic.”

She made some kind of clucking noise, but I continued. “I assume you all met one another?”

“Yes, son,” my dad assured me. “We introduced ourselves.”

“Well, then let me introduce you to this special little lady.”

Franky had gone a bit starstruck, and I could feel her quaking with my hand at the small of her back. I gave her a little squeeze. Personally, I’d always enjoyed that glazed look fans got when they met me, but right now? All I felt was bad. The last thing I wanted was for her to be tongue-tied around my folks. As for my parents, who were also used to dealing with nervous fans, they were taking it all in stride.

I made the introductions, and after they both shook Franky’s hand, which was visibly shaking, my mother offered me her cheek. I bent down to kiss it, then gave my father a side hug as he gave me a quick pat on the back. Franky hugged and kissed her parents and her grandmother as if she hadn’t seen them in five years instead of five days.

For as much as she complained that her parents made her crazy, she obviously adored them, and vice versa. It made me feel warm inside to witness it, and I found myself smiling at their outward display of emotion. I followed up with a handshake for her father and a kiss on the cheek for both her mother and her grandmother, who gave me an affectionate pat.

When Franky was ready to sit—she chose the seat closest to her grandmother—I slid her chair up to the table and then took the seat beside her, with my mother to my left.

My father lifted a rocks glass with about an inch of what I assumed was his standard Macallan. “We’ve just ordered drinks, son. You and Francesca need to catch up.”

“She prefers Franky, Dad.”

He gave her a courtly dip of his head. Clearly, Pops was playing to the room tonight.

“Franky, forgive me.”

Franky’s hand flew into the air, tossing her napkin onto the floor in the process. “No, no! Francesca is fine.”

I bent to grab the napkin, and my skull crashed into something hard—Franky’s skull—as we both tried to retrieve the white linen square at the same time.

“Shit! Are you okay?” I asked, my eyes tearing. Franky pressed her palm against her forehead. The noise she made was half moan, half giggle.

“I think so,” she whispered. “Damn that hurt.”

I lifted her palm from her forehead and replaced it with my lips. “Better?”

“No,” she said, laughing, “but thanks for trying.”

I helped her return to an upright position, just as our waiter appeared, looking as surprised as the rest of our table as we surfaced.

“I’ll have whatever he’s having,” I pointed at my father’s glass, “and my girlfriend will have the blood orange Campari cocktail.”

A small hand gripped my forearm. “Aiden.”

“I’m sorry. Did you want something different?”

Franky shook her head and looked up at me through long, dark lashes. “You know,” she gritted out between her teeth.

I did know. I knew she was afraid of screwing things up for me if someone found out I was no longer involved with Adrianna. I didn’t like having to treat her like the other woman so that some studio could make a few extra bucks. Tonight, we were with our families. There was no reason to hide what Franky meant to me. As for the waiter, I really didn’t care.

“I do know,” I said as I rested my arm around her stiff shoulders and kissed her cheek.

“Relax. No one here is going to out us to the studio. I promise.”

Satisfied that Franky wasn’t changing her drink order, the waiter disappeared, leaving us to navigate what was starting out as a prickly dinner.

“Dinner’s on me tonight,” my father announced, picking up his menu. “Shall we do the five course or the eight course?”

“Dad, I invited you and Mom. Dinner’s on me.”

“Nonsense,” my mother answered. “You’re our boy, of course we’re buying dinner.”

“Yes, but—”

“Listen to your mother, son.”

I loved my dad, but it set my teeth on edge when he got all 1950’s sitcom dad on me and started calling me “son.” He was in performance mode tonight for sure.

“Fine,” I grumbled, “but I’m buying the wine.”

Ignoring my comment, my mother answered my father. “You know I’ll only eat a bite of each, so I’m fine with either. What do you think, Sophia?” My mother smiled across the table at Franky’s mother, whose head jerked up from the menu as if she hadn’t expected to be called upon and hadn’t studied for the test. She looked nervously at her husband and then at Franky.

I already knew what Franky’s answer would be: five. Not because she wasn’t hungry, but because it was the cheapest option. If she thought she could complain about the prices and that I wouldn’t kiss her in front of everyone, she was in for a big surprise.

Instead, Franky smiled at my mother before answering. “We typically eat multiple courses for a family dinner, but I think at this time of night, five courses make more sense.”

“What do you say, Anthony?” My father prodded. “Five courses work for you or do you see more options you’d like to try?”

“No, no.” Mr. Marchesi answered. “Five is good.”

Dinner at Encore was prix fixe. For the five-course meal, we would each select our own antipasto, main dish, and dessert, and then share two pasta dishes. It seemed simple enough, and the selection seemed varied enough for everyone’s particular taste, which was what had made me think it would be a good option. And if I were being truly honest, I was hoping to impress Franky’s family. I’d gotten the impression from her mother that she didn’t consider acting to be very high up on her list of suitable jobs for someone dating her daughter.

Franky leaned toward me, so I bent my head to listen. “This is an Italian restaurant?”

“Yes. I wanted your family to feel at home.”

The furrowed brow and narrowed eyes told me she thought I was crazy. The sun setting over the New Jersey skyline viewed from sixty stories above Manhattan and the sleek, minimalist décor wasn’t exactly reminiscent of Franky’s Brooklyn neighborhood, but the food would be excellent and familiar.

My heart sank as I scanned the menu.

It would be excellent and familiar as long as her parents and grandmother ate sea urchins, kelp, and pig's feet.

What the hell had I been thinking? What was the Italian word for crazy? *È pazza?* Yeah, call me *pazza*.

"Let me rephrase that. I wanted to take us all out somewhere special, and I thought you would like this place."

"Anything wrong?" my mother chirped.

Franky shook her head. "No, of course not. Aiden just likes to spend money, and I was a little concerned."

My father read his line right on cue. "Don't be. It's my treat. There's nothing to worry about."

I snatched the wine list from the center of the table and flipped it open to the available magnums of champagne. "Exactly, and just as I said, I'm buying the wine." I scanned the list, found the most expensive—*pazza*, remember?—and motioned for a waiter. "Could you send the sommelier, please?"

Franky was speaking with her grandmother, pointing out things on the menu, which was fine. This particular display of testosterone wasn't for her. It was for my father.

The sommelier appeared beside the table.

"You wish to order wine, sir?" he asked my father.

I was beginning to feel like I was back in high school. "No, *I* wish to order wine," I announced. My father chuckled. "In fact, I'd like a magnum of the Billecart-Salmon Brut Grande Cuvée. I believe I saw a 1961 vintage on the wine list. And please, make sure I get a separate check for that."

There were two gasps. One from my mother, and the other from the seat beside me.

"Very well, sir." With a neat little bow of his head, the sommelier backed away.

"Aiden." My mother must have noticed the six-thousand-dollar price tag, which would explain the warning note in her voice.

"Aiden!" Guess who also noticed. That left me only one option.

Practically pulling her out of her seat and into my lap, and all but forgetting anyone else in the room, especially the ones sitting around our table, I covered Franky's mouth with my own and kissed her until she went limp in my arms, until I could no longer taste the singular tang of

blood orange and Campari on her tongue, but instead a sweet mix of fine scotch, Campari, and Franky. Her fingers dug into my upper arms, holding on, as if there was the tiniest chance I might drop her. I pulled back just far enough that we were still breathing the same air. “I warned you,” I murmured, my nose grazing hers.

“Hmm?”

One more kiss, but just a quick one, before I helped her slide back into her chair. Six pairs of eyes stared at us; our parents, Nonna, and the waiter, who stood nearby with a tray of champagne flutes. I took a sip of water. Franky cleared her throat and did the same.

Her father, however, looked like he wanted to turn me inside out by my appendix. I took another sip of water; my throat having gone suddenly dry.

The waiter set flutes in front of each of us, except for Franky’s grandmother, who was drinking what looked like a Shirley Temple. Then he went around the table, taking our orders. While my folks and I were more adventurous, opting for baby octopus with eggplant and cocoa nibs or pork trotter with cabbage, Franky and her parents chose the more recognizable options, such as a mixed salad with shrimp and truffled dressing or clams oreganata.

The only one having a problem was Nonna.

Franky shook her head. “*Non habbo lasagne o polpette.*”

The only word I understood was lasagna. I did a quick scan. Lasagna wasn’t on the menu.

Nonna held up an arthritic hand, her index finger and thumb just slightly apart. “*E tutto. Solo un po. Soltanto una polpetta.*”

“*Mama, non lo servono qui,*” Franky’s father said. I didn’t know what he was saying, but I could read the frustration loud and clear.

“*E le gnocchi?*” Franky asked, her tone far more cajoling than her father’s.

Her grandmother’s sour face needed no translation, but I decided I’d ask anyway. “Is there a problem?”

“It’s fine,” Franky answered.

It was obviously not fine. “What can I do to fix it?”

Her voice rose a few decibels, but then dropped when she noticed my parents watching. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried. Just tell me so I can fix it.”

“She wants lasagna and a meatball,” Franky whispered, “but it’s not on the menu.”

I signaled for the waiter. “Is there any chance we could get a small dish of lasagna and a meatball?”

The waiter gawped as if he was expecting me to follow up with the punchline. When I stared right back at him, he realized I wasn’t kidding.

“I’m sorry, sir.” He sniffed at me. “Chef Rhineberg doesn’t take requests.”

Franky tugged on my sleeve and leaned in. “Lasagna isn’t something you can just throw together.” Her breath tickled my ear, and I instantly regretted having invited everyone to dinner, especially when I could’ve been home right now, alone with Franky, nibbling on her—”

“Meatballs?”

Er...No.

Franky eyed the waiter and repeated her question. “Do you think he could make meatballs?”

If he sniffed at her, he was going to need more than a tissue.

“We do have a pasta and meatball dish on our children’s menu.”

“Nonna, mangia un po di pasta con una polpetta? Non ci sono le lasagne.”

“Eh.” Nonna didn’t sound too excited about pasta and meatballs.

Franky turned to me and rolled her eyes. “We’ll take that as a yes.”

Crisis resolved, I raised my champagne flute. “I’d like to make a toast.” I waited while everyone followed, including Nonna, who prompted by Franky, lifted a glass that held more cherries than liquid. “To new experiences, new dreams, and new memories.”

“Salute!” Mr. Marchesi sang out, the sentiment echoed by the rest of us.

“Not bad,” my father said, following a healthy sip. “Not sure if it’s worth six grand, but it’s good.”

Franky gave me a sharp poke in the ribs. “Your father just commented on how you spent your money. Aren’t you going to kiss him?”

“No, I save that for you. Besides, he doesn’t care how I spend my money.”

Stilted conversation followed until two waiters appeared with the appetizer course.

Dinner progressed at a leisurely pace. The waiter didn’t hover but appeared when necessary. The first course was served, which included Nonna’s pasta and her one meatball. It certainly looked like a child’s portion, although to be honest, I couldn’t imagine anyone bringing a child into this place.

Nonna poked a fork into her dinner. “Que e questo?”

With her hands pressed together as if in prayer, Franky shook them and hissed at her in response. “Per favore, mangia, Nonna. Per me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“They gave her spaghetti.”

“Isn’t that what we ordered? Spaghetti with a meatball?”

“No. You don’t eat spaghetti with meat. You eat spaghetti with fish. You eat macaroni with meat.”

“What are you talking about? Everyone eats spaghetti and meatballs.”

Mrs. Marchesi made a strange clucking noise, while her husband just laughed. Franky rolled her eyes. At me this time.

“Not Italians.”

“I’ve had spaghetti and meatballs at your mother’s house.”

Her head keeps shaking and her hands are flying. “No you haven’t. You had rigatoni and meatballs.”

“What’s the difference? It’s all pasta.”

“What’s the difference? You’re kidding, right? Long pasta is for seafood, short pasta is for meat.”

“Exactly,” said Mrs. Marchesi. I was beginning to notice the only time that woman opened her mouth was to criticize.

I leaned forward to watch Nonna picking at the long strands of pasta. Honestly, if you were to mash up any type of pasta and do a blind taste test, I’d never know the difference. I seriously doubted any of them could either, but I didn’t dare say that.

Using her fork, Nonna cut a small piece off her meatball and cautiously lifted it into her mouth. Her lips puckered, her eyes closed, and she gave a little shiver.

“Sa di mierda,” she said, pushing the dish away.

“What’s wrong now?” I asked, trying really hard not to sound annoyed, but pretty sure I wasn’t succeeding.

“Nothing,” Franky said, waving me off. “It’s fine. She’s just not hungry.”

“She said it tastes like shit,” my father volunteered.

Franky looked up, surprised, but then nodded and shrugged, lifting her hands in a *what-can-you-do?* gesture.

I gawked at my father. “Since when do you understand Italian?”

“Since the first time your mother and I went to visit Clooney on Lake Como. No way was I going to let him show me up while we were there.”

My mother smiled like my father had just confessed to curing cancer. “That’s right. Your father speaks like a native. George, not so much.”

Using hand gestures and enunciating like the performing legend he was, my father gave us a taste of his superior skills

“La mia moglie, il tui nasi è blu dal cielo.”

“See,” my mother said with a dramatic sigh. “Like a native.”

Mr. and Mrs. Marchesi exchanged glances as they ducked their heads to hide matching smiles. I raised an eyebrow at Franky, who leaned closer.

“He said, *My beautiful wife, your noses is blue from the sky.*”

Swallowing a laugh, I raised my glass. “Well done, Dad. You’re a natural all right .”