

## CHAPTER ONE

The twilight sun gleamed amber rays on the calm Mediterranean Sea. In the distance, the sky and the sea were fusing into one, as an Impressionist God amused himself by airbrushing warm red and orange strokes across the horizon. Sandra was sitting in the passenger seat of Angelo's car. She glanced over at him, the man she thought she had loved for the past four years, and a sense of claustrophobia swept over her. She looked out of the car window; the quiescent scene was in sad contrast to how she was feeling inside.

*Where had all the time gone?*

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Sandra Caputo had arrived in Italy in 1977 at the age of twenty-six, and for the first time in her life, she had felt she was where she belonged. With open arms, Italy had welcomed her, its warm embrace erasing the sense of inadequacy that had fettered her heart since childhood—or perhaps from before. Her family and schoolmates could never have imagined that sentiments of such insecurity and inadequacy were nested inside the heart of someone who appeared so self-assured.

Although she had been born and raised in Milwaukee, she had never felt at home there, and for as long as she could remember, she had yearned to leave. Even physically, she had felt like a fish out of water; by the time she was fourteen, she was taller than all of the girls and most of the boys in her junior high, and since her mother had instilled in her the importance of good posture, she appeared even taller than she was. When some of the kids nicknamed her “giraffe” and “totem pole,” she acted like it didn't bother her, but it did. Then, at the age of seventeen, when her waist tightened, her breasts grew firm, and her dark hair cascaded in thick waves down the middle of her back, the teasing stopped—only to be replaced by jealousy. That same anarchic head of hair, the bane of her childhood that her mother had fought to tame every morning, was now the main cause of envy amongst her female classmates. Too young to comprehend the jealousy for what it was—the highest form of compliment after imitation—Sandra began to feel inadequate and longed to be like the other girls in her school, the popular, squeaky, cute girls with minuscule bodies that fit perfectly into the miniskirts and smock dresses that were trendy at the time. She yearned to be part of their group, to be part of any group.

But the other girls did everything possible to avoid Sandra. She was too smart, too tall, too pretty—too intimidating, though she was completely unaware. The barrier she had created to camouflage her insecurities was mistaken for aloofness; the other students considered Sandra's attitude supercilious and her proud upright gait more like that of an accomplished teacher than a fellow student. Her female classmates kept Sandra at a distance from what they considered their territory, and the boys' initial callow attempts at getting her attention only succeeded in annoying her because she mistook their fledging initiatives for mockery, to which she responded with the only defense she knew: disregard.

By the time Sandra reached her senior year, she resembled a full-grown woman, often intimidating the male teachers who grew flustered whenever she entered the classroom. By then, any desire to integrate into a group of her peers had been forgotten and substituted with another kind of yearning—to escape, not only from high school, but from Milwaukee altogether. She dreamt of faraway places and

prayed to God for an escape route.

She didn't have to wait long.

One evening after dinner, her father—the son of Italian immigrants—began reminiscing about his parents and their stories of the old country, their true home. After her grandparents had passed away, her father spent more and more time remembering and telling their stories, and eventually their memories became his, as if he had lived there right along with them. Sandra had heard the stories many times, but that night, as her father spoke, something struck her, illuminating her subconscious like a lightning bolt. Not only could she visualize the actual places of which he spoke, she could picture herself there, as if she, too, had lived the experiences herself. She felt Italy *in* her. The minute she realized and accepted that Italy was the answer—her escape route—she felt a tangible weight lift from her shoulders.

For the next few months, Sandra lived, breathed, and dreamt in the language she was certain would be the key to her freedom. A year after graduating from university, and six months after the “old country” had beckoned to her, she informed her parents that she was going to Italy.

## CHAPTER TWO

Sandra landed in Milan on a cold, foggy day in October and immediately felt at home on the Italian soil. She spent the first month travelling around the peninsula. The cobblestone streets in the center of each town and the quaint artisan shops that lined them made her feel as if she had stepped into a Visconti movie set. She could stare at the churches and monuments for hours, their magnificence bringing her to tears. And the food was even more exquisite than her father had told her it would be. Now she understood why he scoffed at the Pizza Hut and Mamma Mia's chains that claimed to serve Italian food. Even the simplest plates of pasta were experiences of unbelievable pleasure, and as her travels took her through the different regions in Italy she was delighted to discover that each had its own delicacies, which she was only too eager to try. Wine ceased being a drink with which to swallow her food; it became part of a dining ritual in which the Italian *restoratori* were only too pleased to lead her

Whenever she checked into a hotel and informed reception that she was indeed traveling alone, the flabbergasted looks that the male staff never failed to give her made her chuckle. "What? A beautiful girl like you? Alone in Italy? How is this possible!" As if on cue, a young gentleman with perfectly coiffed hair and elegant dress would step out of nowhere to offer his assistance as a personal chaperone, tour guide, or anything else that would bring her pleasure. Their passionate frankness made her laugh, although she found their enthusiasm refreshing. Long gone were the men back home who stuttered and blushed whenever they awkwardly invited her out to the movies and a hamburger and fries at the local drive-in. In Italy, although their sincerity was dubious, the men showered her with invitations to candlelight dinners and walks along the seaside. They offered her jewels, champagne, extravagant gifts, and promises of eternal love and devotion. Sandra never accepted any of the proposals, but upon returning to her hotel room, she would giggle into her pillow recalling their urgent pleas, as if her acceptance were a matter of life or death. On one occasion in Naples, a young man actually kissed her hand just like in the movies!

At the end of her month-long journey through Italy, she found herself in sunny, overwhelming Rome, and after some thought, she returned to Milan to make the Lombard capital her home. Something about Milan had made her feel that she could make her nest there; as soon as she had landed in the industrial city, with its taciturn and reserved people, she had felt comfortable, as if she were already a part of it—and them.

It didn't take Sandra long to find a job. Within a few weeks of arriving, she was sitting behind a desk working for the most important weekly TV magazine in the country.

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In 1981, four years after arriving in Italy, the first national, privately owned TV channel offered her the job of executive producer with the specific task of buying the rights to popular American television shows for the Italian market. After successfully importing and adapting some of the most famous American quiz shows and television series of the era, Sandra became one of the most influential and powerful people in the Italian television world. Little by little, her job became the

focal point of her life and little else mattered to her. She had no personal life and systematically refused the invitations to attend parties and mundane events that her colleagues considered a must. She was never seen on the exclusive beaches during the summer holidays; even on Christmas Day, she could be found in her office working alone on some new project. On the rare occasion that she did go away for the weekend or on holiday, Sandra chose secluded areas in the Italian dolomites where she was certain she would not run into anyone she knew. You can change an animal's fur, but not his character: Sandra was as much an outcast in Milan as she had been in Milwaukee.

Even the gossip magazines gave up trying to unveil the mysterious American woman's private life and viciously concluded that she just didn't like men, which wasn't far from the truth; in fact, men bored her. Once the initial wining and dining phase wore down—which, to Sandra's amusement, followed a well-rehearsed pattern in Italy, as if they had all taken the same required courting class—the men would get nervous and tongue-tied just like the others she had met back home, even if the Italians camouflaged their insecurities behind perfectly coiffed hair, trendy dress, and exquisite manners.

Sandra was becoming comfortable in her solitude and was enjoying her independence more each day.

Then she met Angelo.

There were two reasons why Sandra had accepted the invitation to the party that evening. First, it had come directly from the owner of the television station, and second, the party had been organized to celebrate the success of a show that she had produced. She had planned on staying the polite hour and then, as soon as everyone was distracted by the good time they were having, she would inconspicuously make her exit and go home. Just as the decided hour tolled and she was smiling her way toward the door, something—rather, someone—had caught her attention.

It wasn't the loud laughter coming from the far corner of the room that had made her turn her head. It was the sound of *his voice* rising above the other gregarious male voices that had made her stop and turn around. She made her way back to a huddle of men encircling a sole orator, their drinks in hand, laughing at each line of his tale. Sandra drew nearer, pulled by the deep, sensual, yet mischievous tone of voice, half-expecting to overhear the end of a dirty joke. She was surprised, however, to catch the anecdotes of a recent trip to India.

And then she saw the face behind the voice and her heart stopped.

It wasn't just his good looks—for there were many handsome men in Milan—it was the assuredness with which he expressed and carried himself that had captivated her. The small group that had congregated around him was also mesmerized, and he visibly thrived on it. Sandra grabbed a drink off the tray of a passing waiter and stood off to the side to listen to the orator, her eyes glued to his face while he told one funny story after another about his Indian adventure with an unwilling but complying friend. The crowd laughed, and Sandra found herself chuckling along with them. Unexpectedly, he turned in her direction as if he had always been aware of her presence. Their eyes met and locked. He smiled at her, and before she could think of how to react, he was standing in front of her.

*"Ciao, sono Angelo e tu, chi sei? Se posso sapere."* He grinned.

She looked down at her shoes and mumbled her name, the awkward girl from Milwaukee resurfacing from the depths.

"Oh, so *you're* Sandra Caputo. Well, well, well. Congratulations on your success."

“It’s no big deal really,” she mumbled, turning her attention away from his intense stare.

His small audience had now dispersed, leaving her alone with him. She straightened her back, regained her composure, and then looked him in the eye and added, “But thank you and it’s nice to meet you, Angelo. That was a funny story you were telling there.”

Angelo stared into her dark eyes and was silent for a moment. “Come on, let’s go sit down somewhere.” Something inside her told her that this was not a good idea, yet she followed him, and with drinks in hand, they sat down on a sofa in a discreet corner far from curious eyes. They began talking and soon laughing, and as the evening progressed, Sandra felt as if she had known him all her life. She was drawn by his strong character and found his sense of humor refreshing. As he talked, she felt her body being pulled toward him; she pined to lean into his chest and feel his warm embrace. His gaze was hypnotic, and the only way to snap out of his trance was to take a sip of her wine or to turn and smile at a passing acquaintance.

She felt as if there were two Sandras living the experience—one who was enjoying every minute in Angelo’s company, and the other who was observing the scene from a third person’s point of view, analyzing every move, every sentence, every emotion from afar. At one point, the observer in her imagined them from a bird’s eye view and she could see herself listening intently to what he was saying, smiling, nodding, and laughing, yet a voice in the back of her mind kept warning her to take heed.

“Hey ... are you still with me? Or have I completely bored you to death and all you’re thinking about is going home to sleep now?”

“What?” She inwardly shook her fears away. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was just thinking how late it must be, and I have an early meeting tomorrow. What time is it?”

“So, I wasn’t boring you?”

“No, not at all.” She felt herself blush like a teenager again. It was time to go, before she said or did anything silly.

“It’s two o’clock.”

“Two o’clock!” She jumped up from the sofa. “I have to go home and go to sleep. I can’t believe I haven’t conked out already! I’m usually in bed by eleven.”  
*What a stupid thing to say. Way to go, girl.*

“I had a really nice time talking to you tonight.” He took a step closer to her, and she could feel his warmth.

“Me, too,” she answered, fumbling in her purse for her car keys.

“I’d like to see you again, if that’s possible,” he said with a boyish grin that made her stomach pinch.

She smiled. “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

They exchanged phone numbers and began dating. It wasn’t long before she fell hopelessly in love for the first time in her life.

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A year into their relationship, Sandra began wondering why they rarely saw each other on Sundays and never went on vacation together, except the few times that she had joined him when he went on business trips. Her instinct—her personal warning system—was signaling that something was wrong, but she chose to ignore it. Still, the little voice inside her head refused to stay silent. It began making itself heard

when she was incapable of defending herself: in her sleep. The nightmares began, awakening her at all hours of the night and keeping her awake with the sense of foreboding they left behind.

Before each date with Angelo, the usual excitement she had felt became tinged with anxiousness that quickly turned to fear if he was a few minutes late. She had never experienced this kind of fear before, yet she somehow recognized it, as if it had always been a part of her. She feared losing him. She feared abandonment. And at the same time, she sensed her mind was preparing her for both.

One morning, Patrizia, her secretary, came into her office and placed a copy of a weekly gossip magazine on her desk, nervously telling her to open to page twenty-three, before silently exiting. Sandra opened the magazine and saw herself holding hands with Angelo as they walked down a beach in Portofino where they had spent one of their rare romantic weekends together. At first, she smiled, thinking, *who cares if they photographed us? We weren't doing anything wrong.* Then she turned the page and saw a photograph of a woman with a three-year-old girl, walking into a villa in an exclusive suburb on the outskirts of Milan. The words jumped out at her: "Handsome industrialist Angelo Del Conte enjoys a romantic weekend with American TV power lady, Sandra Caputo, while his wife stays home and attends to one of their small children."

Her eyes darted from the words to the images and back again, her mind trying to wrap itself around what she was seeing. She threw the magazine to the floor and tried to stand up, but her knees buckled and all she could do was fall back down into her chair. And then an acrid taste of bile rose in her throat. Five minutes later, she was kneeling in front of the toilet.

## CHAPTER THREE

A year after that article had broken her heart and launched her life into turmoil, here they were, silent as two strangers waiting for a bus, returning from a disappointing weekend in Montecarlo. *Silly me*, Sandra chastised herself. Still blindly in love, she had thought that Angelo had organized this trip to announce his decision to divorce his wife so he could be with her. No matter what she had been through and what she had learned along the way, the small-town, live-the-fairytale girl inside her would not let go of the dream that love did triumph. Those illusions and her pretentiousness had convinced her that he could not live without their love, and her own stubbornness had made her believe that she could not survive without him. He, on the other hand, had another tale reading itself out in his mind. He needed to “take a break” to “work things out.” It was obvious to Sandra that he had already worked things out in his life, and that she was simply no longer a part of it.

As they drove back to Milan, an unexpected sense of relief swept over her, and a weight lifted from her chest. Her breathing became light and effortless, more so than it had been in months. On the one hand, it was sad to accept that she would never be with him again; however, on the other, she realized it was the first time in ages that she could breathe deeply without feeling as if a hand were gripping her heart.

As they crossed over the border into Italy, Angelo broke the silence. “You know, maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea if you accepted that job offer in Chicago you told me about.” She shot him a cool glance. “I mean, going back home might do you good.”

*Home. I thought I was home.* Sandra leaned her head against the glass and stared out of the car window at the dark tunnel wall they were driving through. *The past year had been like going through a tunnel*, she thought. *Will I ever see the light?*

He continued talking, his attempt at being kind sounding trite. “I mean, you’d be close to your family and, you know, I come to the States often for work, so we could still see each other ... sometime.”

“Yeah, but your office is in New York, and I’d be working in Chicago, which isn’t exactly just around the corner and, and ... oh, blah, blah, blah ...”

“Blah, blah, blah, what does this mean?”

Sandra shook her head in response. Another culture barrier, one of the many that had risen between them recently—or had always been there, but she had been blinded by something masquerading as love. She decided not to talk to him anymore—no more arguments, no more battles, and no more discussions. She was tired and defeated; all she wanted to do was get out of the ring. No more psychological boxing matches with Angelo. He had this unnerving way of getting to her, provoking her and challenging her. His predominant competitive nature had been the motivating force in all of his relationships, both professional and personal, and Sandra discovered, much to her dismay, that it was the only way Angelo knew how to interact with people, *especially with women*. He thrived on dragging them into his ring, swinging astute words to agitate them, and then getting excited at their passionate reactions. Initially, she had found his verbal play mentally stimulating, but when all of their discussions turned into a passionate battlefield, it wore her down.

In the past, she too had provoked such discussions, particularly with the men who courted her, challenging them mentally, testing their wit, and enjoying how

uncomfortable she made them. Now she realized that this very power game had been a double-sided blade because it had only fueled her loneliness, isolating her even more from the rest of the world, especially from men. Before she had met Angelo, she had come to the inane conclusion that her relationship difficulties would be resolved as soon as she had met her match: a man who could compete with her intellectually. How wrong she had been and how naively pretentious! She didn't want to compete or battle with anyone. She needed to be with someone who *wouldn't* provoke such reactions in her, someone she could relax around, someone with whom she could lower the power mask and just be herself. Sandra now understood that she had to stop battling and trying to prove herself because it was only making her miserable.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Sandra gazed at the tranquil scene outside and felt at peace. The Mediterranean Sea was dark and calm; its waves caressed the sand with each ebb and flow. In the distance, the sun's hot belly was dipping into the cool, still waters. As she gazed at the sun setting on the horizon, laying itself to rest, she allowed her love for Angelo to do the same. Then she closed her eyes and imagined herself sitting alone on the beach, her arms hugging her knees. The projection was so intense she could hear the waves splash and smell the sea air.

Rain drumming on the windshield brought her out of her dream-like state just as they drove onto the highway that led them far away from the sea. And while a part of Sandra's life was dying, inside her, a miniscule zygote had already travelled through its own long, dark tunnel, multiplying into several hundred cells during its voyage—until it found its resting place inside of her. This cell ball, 0.1 mm in size, would change her life forever.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Sandra woke up and immediately knew something was wrong. In her dream, she had gone to the toilet, but instead of urine, blood had poured out of her. Staring down into the bottomless bowl, she was horrified as she watched the blood swirl down to the apartment below. A face had peered up at her from the orifice, and she gasped when she recognized her mother, her expression blank as the blood dripped past her, as if she, too, was dreaming. She never acknowledged Sandra. It was as if she were invisible.

Sandra replayed the dream over and over in her mind, analyzing the details. It had seemed so real; the stench of fresh blood still reeked in her nostrils, too poignant to pertain exclusively to the subconscious world. She fought the urge to go to the toilet and instead began her morning routine, mechanically going through the motions, prompted by a childlike hope that all was well. She buzzed the concierge, who sent the newspaper up in the elevator. She made herself a pot of coffee, squeezed a glass of fresh orange juice into a tumbler, and munched muesli while going into her home office to check the answering machine and fax for messages that often arrived from the United States during the night.

She came back into the kitchen and sat down heavily on the stool next to the island, her shoulders curving over her coffee. She stared into the cup and sighed. Today she had an appointment with her gynecologist. According to the calculations, she was eight weeks into her pregnancy, so today she should be able to see a heartbeat. *Why wasn't she looking forward to it?*

She lifted her coffee to take a sip, but its rich aroma made her stomach turn. *Maybe all is well*, she thought, as the morning sickness sent her to the bathroom.

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Dr. Arioli, her gynecologist, announced with a smile, "There's the little heartbeat. Take a look."

Sandra peered into the dark image on the screen and stared at the blurry blob in the center of it. A tiny, flashing light beat nervously, like a distress signal, making her think of a lighthouse signaling over the horizon of a dark sea in the middle of the night. The Doppler registered the beats as they pumped along. She stared, mesmerized by the life she was witnessing inside her; it seemed so distanced and surreal, as if she were looking inside the body of another woman.

Over the next few days, whenever insidious thoughts of loss crept into her, she would remember the heartbeat she had seen and imagine it growing into her little boy—she was certain it was a boy—and her anxiety would turn to calm. At least during the daytime. At night while she slept, her fears ran amuck, opening the gates to the nightmares that slithered into her mind with symbolic images of death and loneliness.

One night, she rose from bed with a grunt and went to pour herself a glass of wine. The soothing alcohol entered her veins, its warmth soon breaking down the barriers of her anxiety. When she could resist the weight of her eyelids no more, she put the glass down, snuggled under the comfort of her blanket, and abandoned herself to the sleep that was gently seizing her.

*It was late at night, and the sky was dark and starless. Sandra stood alone on the wooden, creaking dock of a small, unknown port as she watched an immense*

*navy ship depart from the harbor. The wind was blowing in her face, the air cool and humid. It could rain any minute now, she thought. She hugged her wool cardigan tightly around her and stared out toward the black ocean. Then, she looked down into her hands and saw that she was holding four eggs. One of them was broken, so she let it slip into the water, some of its slimy membrane still sticking to her hands. One by one, she dropped the other three into the cold, wet darkness.*

Sandra opened her eyes with a start and jolted into a sitting position. Her heart was beating uncontrollably, and she opened her mouth to catch her breath. Her eyes darted around the shadowy room. With each waking breath, the realization of death filled her heart.

She ran to the bathroom and felt heavy drops of blood drip from her into the toilet. She sat on the seat until the borders cut into her thighs, her head hanging heavily in her hands.

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In the morning, Sandra phoned her gynecologist, Dr. Arioli, who attempted to reassure her that spotting was quite common during the first trimester of pregnancy—but only succeeded in agitating her even more. She then called Yolanda, her friend, her confidante, and most importantly, her astrologer—the only person who knew how to make her feel better.

“*Ciao, bella*, I do not like when I hear you so upset. Come now, if you like. I have one hour to dedicate to you,” Yolanda’s husky voice purred through the receiver after exhaling cigarette smoke. Her staccato Italian accent was both reassuring and amusing to Sandra. Although Sandra was now fluent in Italian, Yolanda still preferred speaking in English to her, with the excuse that she needed to practice. The truth was that Sandra’s heavy American accent had initially irritated Yolanda. She had always been diffident toward foreigners and believed that any country outside of Italy was of the third world, full of uncultured people. On the few occasions when she had been obliged to leave Italian soil, she packed the most useless items—*aspirin*, for example—for fear that such commodities would not be available beyond her beloved country. Yolanda believed there was no reason to leave “the most beautiful country in the world.” She claimed that she learned enough about the world through her clients and by watching television.

“Emilio Salgari wrote *Sandokan* without ever leaving his home,” she had once said to Sandra. “I have my world in my head. I don’t need to see anything else or be like you foreigners, always searching, traveling, asking. The answers are in our minds. And look at the Tibetan people. If the Chinese had left them alone, they would be in peace in their own land, instead of roaming around! My house is my world!” she would exclaim triumphantly. It had been a surprise to Yolanda when she realized how fond she had grown of this American, to the point that she now considered her a true friend. Nine years had passed since they first met.

Fifteen minutes after hanging up the phone, Sandra walked into Yolanda’s apartment and followed her into her office. She sank down into the chair in front of the desk, opposite Yolanda. Three fat cats—one black, one white, and one sandy colored—sauntered into the room, meowing a lazy welcome. Yolanda lit a cigarette and began studying Sandra’s chart and consulting the ephemerides book, occasionally emitting a laconic “Uh-huh.” When she finally looked at Sandra, she was smiling.

“Well, my darling, the planets are very positive for you. What is the

problem?" she questioned, slowly blowing the smoke out of the corner of her mouth.

"Well, Yo, I lost a little blood this morning and ..." Sandra sighed and shifted in her chair.

"Blood? What is some blood? Every woman has blood during pregnancy. It is normal! You think too much, that is your problem. It's that damn moon you have, always make you worry and think. *Sandra*, a generous Jupiter is in a good aspect and should certainly bring you good luck and expansion, the realization of your dreams. You have never been in such a positive astrologic position for as long as I know you!" She took a long drag from her cigarette.

"Then why am I so sure that something will go wrong? Why can't I sleep at night?"

"I tell you, it's your moon in Pisces. You are born with paranoia. You must learn to live with it." As Sandra's lower lip began to tremble, Yolanda softened her tone and said, "Don't be upset now! Let me see where the planets go over next few weeks before we come to conclusions."

She placed a ruler on the page in the ephemerides and studied the chart in religious silence. After what seemed an interminable amount of time, she sighed and declared, "*Dunque*, Saturn may be in a little difficult position for next few days, but that should not create the problem for you." Sandra shifted the weight from one buttock to the other. "It is this shitty Uranus that is beating down on your Venus for last year and it probably cause you this nervous tension and anxiety you feel now. It is moving ahead and will be gone in a couple weeks, never to return again." Yolanda put her cigarette out in an ashtray full of butts.

Sandra's eyes welled up with tears.

"Why you cry? I know why you cry. You are pregnant, and the hormones, they are dancing and they make you crazy. That's what it is."

The image of her hormones doing a salsa brought a smile to Sandra's face. "Oh, Yolanda, I should have been more careful. Maybe this is all a mistake. I'm not even with Angelo anymore, and he doesn't even know I'm pregnant! If only I had been more careful ... if only—"

"If, if, if! If my grandmother had wheels, she would be a tram. You cannot change what you are and what has happened. Now stop this crying. Where is strong *Sandra* that I always know and love?"

"I think she went on vacation and left this secondhand version in her place."

"Well, you tell her to come back now. Listen to me. The stars are on your side, and when Jupiter is in such good position, he always brings fortune to our lives. Maybe not immediate, so remember my words: no matter what happens, one day you will remember this trying time and realize that it was in this moment that you did things or made decisions that would bring you happiness in the future."

"And what about the nightmares?"

"I read much about these things. All the pregnant women have the fears and the bad dreams. Some even dream of killing their husbands. Ah! In many cases, this is not a nightmare, but a dream come true." She laughed at her own joke. "Anyway, psychologists do intensive studies, and they say it is normal, so ... you stop thinking now!"

Yolanda reached her hand over the desk and gently placed it on Sandra's. "Calm down, and we see what happens over the next couple of days. The doctor, he said to wait over the weekend and see, so you wait until Monday. Maybe it stops. Then you do another testing. So, we wait and see. Everything will go well, you will see." She smiled warmly at Sandra, who wanted so badly to believe that everything

was fine but couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face.

"Now, now, now. You must learn to stop worrying for once in your life. Oh *mamma mia!*"

"It's just ... Yolanda ..." Sandra wiped the tears from her cheeks. "You know, when I found out I was pregnant, I felt as if I had truly arrived where I always wanted to be, like I had finally accomplished something. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yes, of course. It is the ugly duck who looks for her home, the place where she feels like a swan. Don't worry, you will find it. You will find it, *chérie.*"

Yolanda leaned back in her chair and shook her head, a maternal smile on her face. Pasta, the big white cat, pounced on her desk and defiantly laid his chubby body across the charts, baring his fat tummy—his way of announcing that the session was over and he wanted cuddles. So did Sandra, but she had no one to bare her belly to.

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Over the next two days, the blood came and went, sometimes heavier, sometimes ceasing altogether, giving Sandra a glimmer of hope that all was well. *A lot of women lose blood at the beginning of pregnancy; the books say it's normal, and you can have a perfectly normal pregnancy afterward*, she would uselessly repeat to herself. Waiting until Monday to find out what was going on inside her body was tormenting her.

In no mood to talk to anyone, she let all calls go directly to her answering machine. All she wanted to do was sequester herself inside the walls of her apartment, her refuge, where she felt safe. She tried to read the newspaper, but the articles depressed her. She attempted working, but her mind drifted, so she turned on the television—but that was like working. Nothing helped her forget the waiting, the apprehension. The hours dragged on inexorably, reminding her of a phrase she had heard Yolanda say: "The years fly by, but many times, the days drag on."

She peered out the window at the gloomy Milanese day. A smog-filled viscous rain had fallen relentlessly for the past two days, and the temperature had dropped significantly. Staying indoors was a comfort to her, if only she could turn off her mind like a faucet. She finally decided to catch up on some reading and perhaps get a video from the local rental shop. She felt an exaggerated elation at the easy solution she had found to passing the time. She began to scan the books on her bookshelf, searching for the perfect one—nothing too profound or emotional, yet interesting enough to distract her from her pessimism. She smiled with childlike glee as she pulled a book off the shelf and looked at its cover: John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*. An old friend from college had sent it to her, and it had sat there collecting dust all of these years. The excitement from having made a decision still motivating her, she went down to the video shop and chose a newly-released light comedy, *Back to the Future*, the only American film rented there not dubbed in Italian.

Back in her safe surroundings, Sandra snuggled up on the sofa with a warm cup of tea and watched the movie that ultimately proved to be a better remedy than she imagined, and for two full hours, she nearly forgot about her situation. She regretted not having rented more movies, dubbed or not. She glanced outside at the rain that was now thundering down. That, combined with pregnancy exhaustion, halted any good intentions of going out to get more movies.

She picked up *A Confederacy of Dunces*, but after rereading the same page three times without assimilating what she had read, she surrendered and began preparing dinner. In a premeditated attempt to shorten the day, Sandra had skipped lunch. So by 5:30 p.m., she was hungry, and for the first time in ages, she was having dinner at “Milwaukee time,” she thought, smiling inwardly as she sat down at the table. After watching the eight o’clock news, she washed up and went to bed, praying for easy sleep.

Sandra had never been able to sleep eight hours straight without having to urinate at least once during the night, and that night was no exception. In fact, her bladder commanded her to the toilet every couple of hours, and each time fresh red blood dripped into the bowl, causing her heart to sink deeper and deeper into the pit of her stomach. It got so bad and the fear of seeing blood so great, that by the third trip to the bathroom, she stopped turning the light on to avoid seeing red. But the darkness gave her no peace, for as is true with all beings, when one of the senses is dulled, the others become keener; every time she wiped herself, she could *feel* it, slimy and slippery on the toilet paper. And above all, she could smell its stench, pungent and sweet, like wet fox fur. It was the feel and the smell of death, and Sandra knew it would not stop until it drained her of all her hopes and dreams. She battled to keep the reality of what was happening from fully entering her conscious mind, for she was exhausted from thinking, worrying, hoping, and crying. All she wanted now was to sleep and to silence her thoughts until the following day.

At four o’clock in the morning, the fatigue beating at her bones, the sleep that her mind had been begging for finally crept into her body and took over.

Sandra awoke late the following day and, forgetting it was Sunday, picked up the phone, like an automaton, and dialed the clinic’s number only to hear the answering machine saying to call back during office hours. She stared at the receiver, as if it were at fault. “And what if someone is dying here? What is she supposed to do? Damn it!”

She slammed the phone down and went to the kitchen to make a strong cup of coffee, which she then drank, challenging the nausea its aroma sent through her. *One more day of this.* She could wait. She was strong, she repeated to herself, trying to stop her hands from trembling. And anyway, the thought of going to the hospital just for them to tell her that she was losing her baby was unbearable; she knew that already, and she also knew there was nothing anybody could do about it. Her body had betrayed her, failed her. There would be no baby, no little Angelo to take care of. Her last tie with the only man she had ever loved had been severed. Someone had decided that she was not worthy of being the mother of this child.

Sandra had never felt so alone in her life.

What if she could never conceive again? What if she never fell in love again? What if this was how she was going to spend the rest of her life? In a foreign country with no real friends, no husband, no children—just her work. And if work took a turn for the worse? What would she do?

She downed the remainder of her coffee and peered out at the bleak, Milanese sky. It was going to be another dismal day. *So why do I love this city so much? Why do I feel so at home here?*

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Sandra never imagined that the situation could worsen, but it did. Later that afternoon, she lay on the sofa, curled up on her side, and waited. She knew what was

coming. It had been long overdue. Her chest filled with a painful fury propelled by grief so overwhelming it felt as if her lungs were on fire. The tears gushed from her eyes, every sob a wave of anguish, and with each struggled breath, a torrent of tears poured down her already bloated face onto the sofa below her. So many lonely tears, she feared they would never subside until her heart burst open, releasing the tsunami that was drowning her very soul. She heard the wind whopping the rain against the windows of her apartment; *the whole world is crying with me*, she thought. The tears streaked down her cheeks, and she imagined them carving an indelible groove that would always remind her of this lonely night in Milan, curled up on a sofa, with death and heartache inside her.

The wind howled, and she swore she heard her mother's voice in it, accusing her and reminding her that good girls don't date married men. The tears welled up once again, like an uncontrollable wave of despair, cold as the Atlantic Ocean on a stormy night.

*Oh God, why won't it stop? Please stop. Stop crying, stop bleeding, stop raining. For God's sake! Stop! Stop!*

What if it didn't stop? What if she bled to death there on the sofa? Who would come to her rescue? Whom could she call? *Patrizia? Oh my God, after nine years in Italy, the only person I can think of calling is my secretary. No, wait. Yolanda. Yes, Yolanda is my friend, and she would help me.*

She was no longer in control—had she ever been? Someone else was dictating her life now; something else had taken control of her body, and it was not much bigger than a bean. A lifeless bean.

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On Monday morning, Sandra called Dr. Arioli, her gynecologist. He didn't have much to say except, "Call me after you do the ultrasound today," and out of concern, he asked whether she would be going alone or if someone would be accompanying her.

She poured the rest of her coffee down the sink, the smell still making her nauseous, and she wondered how long she would have to endure the symptoms of morning sickness. She got dressed and went to the hospital for what she knew was going to be the final ultrasound.

After the examination, Sandra sat up on the exam table, her legs dangling over the side. She felt tiny and helpless. The radiologist told her what she had expected to hear and then handed her some paper towels to wipe herself off with. She was horrified to see that some blood had trickled down her thigh and onto the white paper sheet below. The doctor mechanically handed her a cotton pad and told her she could get dressed. She went behind the curtain to put her pants back on, wondering why she had the ridiculous habit of hiding her underwear in her pants pocket every time she went for a doctor's examination. As she dressed, she heard a tape recorder turn on, and to her horror, the doctor began dictating the results of the examination.

"The gestational sac is still recognizable but appears to be clearly situated in a lower centered position with respect to the previous examination."

Sandra cleared her throat loudly, hoping it would remind the man that she was still there, that she could hear his every word, each of them piercing a hole in her heart like a pickaxe boring into a block of ice. He continued his monotonic, sadistic monologue.

“The internal embryo is still recognizable, showing a CRL slightly superior in respect to what was previously noted, but there is no evidence of fetal heartbeat.”  
*No evidence of fetal heartbeat. No evidence of fetal heartbeat.*

Why couldn't he wait until she got dressed and left, she asked herself, fumbling with the zipper of her pants that wouldn't close. Then it occurred to Sandra that maybe the radiologist didn't realize that his patients could hear his every word, that if she stepped out from behind the curtain, he would stop the torture. She hurriedly finished dressing, wiped her tears with the back of her hand, and came out from behind the curtain. The radiologist, a large microphone in hand, nodded at her and continued recording, his voice droning on as if he were a taxi dispatcher giving out addresses over the radio.

“In conclusion, the above described findings are attributed to an internal abortion. Doctor Eduardo Triccani.”

He placed the mike down gently and informed her that the written report would be ready in half an hour if she chose to wait; otherwise he would mail it to her.

“No, I'll wait. Thank you, doctor.” She smiled and shook his hand. “Nice equipment you have there, very professional recording system,” she added.

With a proud look on his face, he led her to the door.

*What an inane thing to say! And what the hell did I thank him for?*

## CHAPTER FIVE

The sky was dark and the air chilly when Sandra left the hospital. She hugged her coat with one hand, and with the other, she choked the ultrasound report. On the way to her car, she stopped at a phone booth to call Dr. Arioli to make an appointment for as soon as possible. “Next Tuesday? Yes, that will be fine.”

Just as Sandra arrived home and was turning the key to her apartment door, she heard her phone ringing. She was in no mood to talk to anyone until she heard Yolanda’s voice leaving a message. Sandra realized she needed to verbalize what had just occurred or it would not seem real.

She picked up the phone.

“*Allora?*”

“I lost it.”

“*Cazzo!*” Sandra heard her light up a cigarette. “How do you feel?”

“Fine. I’m okay. Now I just want it out of my body. I don’t want any more of its lifelessness in there. I’m going in to do a D&C next week, and then it’s on with my life.”

“Hey, superwoman, it’s okay to be upset. What you are going through is painful and it is all right to feel the pain. Don’t always try to be so strong all the time. What you went through—Angelo, the baby—this would have killed a horse, so you be sad if you feel sad. *Capito?*”

Sandra stared at the medical file she had tossed on the chair.

“And don’t forget, all this happens with an incredible Jupiter on your side, so something good is going to come of this in the end. Maybe baby, he wasn’t healthy. How you know? Only God knows these things. Trust me and you will see.”

Sandra bit her tongue. She did not want the anger building up inside her to explode on her only friend. Oh, how she wanted to blame someone, anyone, even though she knew there was no culprit. *How could you have been so wrong?* She wanted to scream into the receiver, *You and your damned Jupiter!*

“You call me if you need anything, *capito?*” Yolanda inhaled slowly on her cigarette.

“Thanks, Yolanda. I’ll call you. Hey, someone’s knocking on the door,” she lied, “probably the landlady. I have to go now. Bye.” Sandra hung up and stared at her empty apartment.

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On the day Italians begin preparations to commemorate their dead and Americans celebrate Halloween, Sandra entered the hospital for her D&C, and as with all pregnant women, they sadistically put her in the maternity ward, which was not as depressing as she thought it would be. In fact, she even visited the nursery to gaze through the window at the infants who had desired to come into the world, unlike hers. When none of the mothers or nurses were around, she whispered to them, “Hey, you guys got any friends still up there that might want a nice mommy? You tell them about me, okay? Let them know I’m here and I’m going to try again in a couple of months. Okay?” One of them fidgeted, another yawned, and a third waved a tiny fist at her. She chose to believe that her message had been heard and imagined them passing it on in an angel relay. She pressed her forehead against the glass pane and fought the tears.

Two new mothers in bathrobes and slippers approached the glass to adore their newborns, their respective husbands at their sides. One of the proud fathers turned to Sandra and asked which one was hers.

"I miscarried," she answered, trying not to sound too grave, at the same time thinking it ironic that she was concerned about not making this stranger uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, really."

"Me, too."

"You'll see, next time it'll turn out okay. My sister had two miscarriages, and then she had twins," his eager wife added, glowing as mothers do.

"Yes, I know. And it's okay. It really is. I'm fine and, you know, they say that there's always a good reason why this happens," Sandra offered, feeling the need to comfort the husband who had turned red with embarrassment.

"Yes, that's what they say, don't they?" he offered.

"So, which one is yours?" Sandra asked out of politeness.

"There he is, our little Francesco." The father pointed proudly, waving his fingers at the sleeping babe. His wife snuggled up close to him, and he hugged her.

"Well, he's very beautiful," Sandra said before turning to go back to her room.

"Thank you and good luck," the young man replied.

Sandra could feel their pitying stare pierce her back as she walked back to her room, so she held her head high. She didn't want anyone's damned pity.

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The D&C took fifteen minutes, they informed her when she opened her eyes. She lay on the hard, white bed in her room, trying to stay awake to plan what to do next, but her mind was in a fog and soon surrendered to the comfort of the anesthetics that momentarily erased her memories as she fell into a dreamless, artificial slumber.

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A week earlier, she had been in her gynecologist's office, pregnant, discussing her weight and where she wanted to deliver the baby. Today, only one Tuesday later, here she was again, except now there was only one heart beating inside of her. Acknowledging this simple medical fact that many human beings take for granted, that is, the one heart beating, made the other—two hearts beating simultaneously in the same body—all the more extraordinary to her. Through some unusual thought process, Goethe's *Faust*, which she had read in university, came to mind. Had Faust been a woman, Sandra mused, he never would have fought Mephistopheles; he would have delivered him nine months later. "Alas, two souls dwell in my breast," she mumbled out loud, and then smiled at her silly thoughts even in these dire circumstances.

The door opened, and Dr. Arioli's secretary told her to go into the doctor's office. He stood up to greet her with his usual paternal smile. "So, how do you feel?"

She mumbled that she was fine and silently hoped he wouldn't waste time trying to comfort her.

"Dr. Arioli. How long do I have to wait to have another ... to get pregnant again?" She recognized the voice speaking to be her own, but her words reverberated inside her head as if someone else was saying them from a distance.

He raised his eyebrows and paused a moment before saying, “Only until your next cycle. Physically, there’s no need to wait much longer, though emotionally, you may want to wait a couple months until you feel mentally strong enough to try again. Now, let me examine you.”

Sandra gasped. She wasn’t psychologically prepared for a pelvic examination, and the last thing she wanted was to have someone poking around inside of her so soon after what she had just been through.

“It’s a normal procedure for your gynecologist to examine you after an operation,” he said reassuringly.

“I know, I guess, but ...” Sandra muttered. “I just wasn’t ... ready today. It’s only been a few days since ...”

“And that is exactly why I need to examine you,” he said, rising from behind his desk.

Sandra went into the dressing room to undress, and then into the examination room. With a heavy sigh, she plopped her naked butt down on the table, lay down, spread her legs, and perched her bent knees over the cold metal support braces that always reminded her of a pitch fork without the middle prong.

Dr. Arioli was quick, a characteristic she appreciated about him.

“Perfect!” he exclaimed. Unusual choice of words, she thought.

“Your uterus is in perfect shape; the size, the position, everything is perfectly normal. I don’t see any reason why you shouldn’t be able to bear as many children as you want.”

“Just one would be enough,” she quietly said.

He smiled and walked back into his office. After she dressed, she joined him and sat down.

“You know, you’re still young,” he said cautiously. “You should wait until you meet the right person.”

“No, I won’t wait. I don’t have to.”

“Will you be returning to the United States to get ...” he cleared his voice, “the care you are looking for, or do you need some advice for reproductive assistance here in Italy?”

“I may need your advice, thank you.” She was shocked at herself for what she was openly discussing. How long had she been contemplating this idea? Would she actually go ahead and pursue it?

“Well, in any case, let your heart and body heal, and then we’ll discuss what to do next. Get some rest, enjoy life, don’t work too hard, and stay out of the cold.”

Sandra felt an urge to hug him. Right now, she felt closer to him than she ever had to her own father. She shook his hand, said good-bye, then left his office and stepped out into the street. The cold October wind was whipping through the trees, each gust slapping her face and making her skin burn. The wind usually irritated Sandra, but today it was awakening her senses, fine-tuning them and bringing about awareness in her, as if she were recognizing her life as it was for the first time. She knew that she would never see Dr. Arioli again, and she knew that she would have her child. She also knew that she would accept the job offer from Chicago and that she wasn’t going to wait any longer than necessary to put her plan into action.

## CHAPTER SIX

Sandra had taken only a week off to recover, but the series of events that had occurred made her feel as if a year had passed by. As she neared her office, she gasped when she saw her desk buried in papers, notes, boxes, and betacam. Patrizia, her secretary, followed closely behind her, listing the messages and phone calls that had accumulated over the week. Sandra barely acknowledged her. She entered her office, informed Patrizia that she wasn't to be disturbed, and then let the door close in the girl's face.

Sandra stood in the middle of her office, scanned her surroundings as if seeing them for the first time, and then slowly sat down behind her desk. After a few minutes of thoughtful silence, she buzzed her phone. A second later, Patrizia poked her head inside the door. She had been waiting impatiently with her hand on the knob.

Patrizia was the only person, apart from Yolanda, who had known about Sandra's pregnancy and miscarriage. Now that it was all over, Sandra regretted having shared such an intimate and devastating period of her life with her secretary, whose presence now disturbed her. She had crossed the boundaries in their work relationship and there was no turning back. Patrizia was smiling at her in a confidential, overly sympathetic way, and Sandra felt ashamed that she had confessed details about her private life to someone she had never even had dinner with.

"Are you okay? I mean, really okay?" Patrizia asked, approaching her desk.

Sandra held her breath and reflected on the question, and then exhaled and felt the oxygen flowing through her bloodstream, bringing her back to life. She stretched her arms high over her head, bent her neck and stretched it from side to side, then pulled her arms down slowly and arched her back in a long stretch. She looked like a cat waking up after a nap.

She turned and smiled at her secretary. "Let's get to work, Pat."

Patrizia nodded eagerly and sat down in front of Sandra's desk. "Did you get a chance to see the last show?"

"Yes, I did, and I must say it looked pretty good. What the hell was Liliana wearing? She looked like a tube of mayonnaise squeezed in the wrong places. How the hell could she breathe with that dress on?"

"She couldn't, but she liked the way it 'amplified her *décolleté*,'" Patrizia said.

"Her *décolleté*? It looked like her breasts were screaming for air, and I was sure one of her nipples was going to make a surprise exit at any minute. She knows I hate vulgarity on this show—I mean, damn, the show itself is vulgar enough."

"Well, when the cat's away ..."

"Yeah, well the cat's back and she's filing her nails."

"Audience went up, though," Patrizia interjected with satisfaction.

"Don't tell me you think it's because they saw some skin? Patrizia, don't get simple on me now."

"No, I'm just telling you because that's what she's going to say when you ask her about the dress."

"Naw, I'm going to let it go this time. I don't have the strength today to deal with this petty shit." Sandra shuffled through the messages piled on her desk. "I must admit, it was a pretty moving scene, that mother-daughter reunion after twenty-five

years. I never would have believed it. I'm glad you insisted on pursuing that story."

If Patrizia had a tail, it would have been wagging back and forth like a whip; there was nothing she liked more than to please her boss, and this was the first time she had been entirely responsible for an episode of the show.

"I mean, her mother dumps her on a doorstep and goes on with her life. She goes off to another country, gets happily remarried, and has more kids, while the daughter's life is a complete mess: foster homes, beatings by one of the foster fathers, she runs away a few times. When the letter from the mother arrived and you told me about her story and how she was asking us to help her find her daughter because she wanted to ask her forgiveness, I thought, no way would the girl accept. It's incredible how deep the blood ties go, isn't it? It almost made me cry this time ... almost," she said with a smirk on her face.

*Almost?* She had bawled so hard she thought her heart would gallop out of her chest! But no one in the office had to know that.

"There wasn't a dry eye in the studio when the mother and daughter finally saw each other and hugged," Patrizia added triumphantly. The episode had the highest rating of the season so far, and she had been hopeful that Sandra would now ask her to collaborate on all of the shows. Patrizia secretly fantasized about opening up a production company one day with her boss. Little did she know that work was no longer a priority for Sandra.

The hours passed by, and Sandra tried to concentrate, but she found herself periodically reopening and rereading the letter from the television production company in Chicago offering her a job. It was the third time they had written over the last six months, each time offering more money and more tempting perquisites. The type of work enticed her; they specialized in documentaries, something Sandra had always dreamed of doing, and she was tired of the all-glam, no-substance shows she was producing in Italy. Her show had done extremely well, and the ratings were amongst the highest in the history of Channel 10, but there was nothing about the show that touched her heart. She wouldn't miss it. The money they offered from Chicago was almost double what she was making now, and she would be closer to home, closer to her aging mother.

*Oh my God, I'm going back home.*

Above all, she could start anew. No more Angelo, no more empty void, no more dead babies or vacant wombs. However, there was one last dream she had to fulfill in Italy—one more thing she wanted from this country before she turned her back on it.

While Sandra was lost in her own world, contemplating her plan of action, Patrizia, who was oblivious to her boss's distraction, suggested themes for the upcoming episodes. Suddenly, Sandra rose from her desk, grabbed her coat, and left, leaving Patrizia speechless, her mouth ajar as she watched her boss storm out of the office and into the elevator.

She stepped out into the cold Milanese air and exhaled as if surfacing from an apnea underwater dive. As she walked to her car, she glanced up at the grey sky. The infamous, white Milanese sun, translucent and cold, smothered by the pollution, seemed to be gasping for air as it fought to stay afloat in the smoggy sky. A nebulous curtain spread out over the sky like spilt skim milk. *Milano, la mia Milano*, Sandra thought. From October to March, the eerie curtain descended upon the city, creeping into the city streets, cold and damp like dry ice, the fog rising higher and higher until the buildings dissolved beneath the misty effluvium. Sandra could tell that it was going to be another one of those nights. She didn't mind it so much, quite the

contrary.

It was a thirty-minute drive from the TV station, located on the outskirts of Milan, to her flat in the center of the city. She walked through her apartment door at noon and sucked in the air as if she had walked into a protected nature zone with a pleasant microclimate. Her own private, protected zone.

After changing into a sweat suit, Sandra plopped down on the sofa and looked around. *Now what do I do?* With the exception of the week she had taken off for illness, it was the first time she could remember being at home at that hour on a weekday, and it was disconcerting. Even her apartment appeared perturbed by her unexpected arrival; she didn't find it as welcoming as she usually did. Everything was still, too still. Nothing seemed to know what to do with this unexpected change of routine. She felt like a stranger exploring an area for the first time, as if she didn't live there but was temporarily occupying space until the real Sandra charged through the door at seven o'clock.

She sat on the sofa until one o'clock, waiting for a clue as to why she was there at that hour and why she felt so numb. *Maybe I'll have lunch*, she thought. That was as good an excuse as any to get up. She wasn't particularly hungry, but what else does one do at home at midday? She pushed herself up from the couch, went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and stood staring at the food, searching for something appealing, something that would say, "Eat me, please." She released the refrigerator door and let it close with a muffled hermetic sound. Then she turned her head, and her eyes fell on the phone, as if it had called out her name. She sighed. It was time to do what she had really come home to do.