

The River City Chronicles by J. Scott Coatsworth - Part Ten

Written by Administrator
Friday, 15 March 2019 01:22 -

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Sacramento author J. Scott Coatsworth has written and published a number of short stories, novellas and full-length novels, but “The River City Chronicles” holds a special place in his little writer heart.

In many ways, it is a love letter to Sacramento, one that we wanted to share with Outword’s readers. To do that we have uploaded the next installment of chapters of the book here, for you to read online.

Previously in the River City: Diego met with his ex-wife Luna, and she asked him to take their son, Gio. Diego tried to connect with Gio, but was rebuffed. He told Marcos about his son, and Marcos was less than happy about the whole thing.

Sam called Matteo to ask if they could get married at Ragazzi, and of course, Matteo said yes. Then Sam and Brad planned their wedding day together.

Carmelina hired a PI to try to find her granddaughter.

Ben worked his first shift at Zocalo, and it was a disaster. But he survived.



J. Scott Coatsworth

Marissa and Tristan almost went all the way, but then she found out that Ricky, one of her

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friends, from the streets had been beaten up and went to see him in the hospital. Brad, who as head of the LGBT center also knows Ricky, decided to bring the boy home with him, with Sam's blessing.

Marcos planned a meet-the-boyfriend dinner with Tristan, and decided he approved of the match.

That's what you missed!

Major Characters:

- **Ben Hammond:** 35 – Trans author and barista working on his first novel
- **Brad Weston:** 30 – Runs the LGBT Center, former chief of staff for GOP senator, partner to Sam
- **Carmelina di Rosa:** 55 – Semi-retired, redhead, lost her husband Arthur three months ago
- **Dave Ramos:** 47 – Human resources consultant and Carmelina di Rosa's tenant

- **Diego Bellei:** 47 – The chef at Ragazzi restaurant, married to Matteo Bianco.
- **Marcos Ramirez:** 39 – Web designer and gay playboy who works with the LGBT center
- **Marissa Sutton:** 17 – Bisexual homeless teenager who turns up at Ragazzi for the cooking class
- **Matteo Bianco:** 47 – Co-owner and host at Ragazzi restaurant, married to Diego Bellei.
- **Sam Fuller:** 23 – Suspense novel writer, working on second novel, partner to Brad Weston

Minor Repeating Characters:

- **Andrea Smith:** deceased - Carmelina's daughter
- **Arthur di Rosa:** deceased – Carmelina's husband
- **Dana Pearce:** Matteo and Diego's immigration lawyer
- **Daniele Amoroso:** 40 – Italian suitor interested in Carmelina
- **Darryl Smith:** Andrea's adoptive father

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- **Ella Jackson-Cucinelli:** 32 – Caucasian woman recently transferred to Sacramento from Chicago

- **Emily Stamp:** P.I. hired by Carmelina

- **Giovanni "Gio" Mazzocco:** Diego's son

- **Jason Clark:** One of Marissa's friends at McClatchy High

- **Jessica Sutton:** Marissa's adoptive mother

- **Loylene Davies:** friend of Carmelina's

- **Luna Mazzocco:** Diego's Ex and Gio's mother

- **Max Cucinelli:** Matteo and Diego's immigration lawyer

- **"Moms" Cucinelli:** Mother to Max and Ella, trans woman

- **Rex Ward:** Owner of the Twink tattoo shop

- **Ricky Martinez:** One of the homeless kids from the LGBT center

- **Tristan Dayton:** Marissa's boyfriend

•☐☐ **Valentina Bellei:** Diego's sister who lives in Italy

82 - Something To Look Forward To

Dave sat on the rug on his bedroom floor in his pajamas, holding the photo frame in his hands, rocking gently back and forth.

It had been an accident.

He'd been rooting around his garage, looking for an old notebook, when he came across *the box* . It was a standard banker's box, a white box with a white box top that was covered in dust. He recognized it instantly.

Two years before, on the third anniversary of John's death, he'd packed up all the remaining things that reminded him of his love. He'd put them out here up on the top shelf in the garage, out of the way. Out of mind. Not that he ever really forgot.

But life went on. Every day, every week, every month was a little easier.

Until he'd opened the box.

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Now he sat on the floor of his bedroom in his pajamas, staring at a photo of the two of them together on their trip to Venice, posing in front of the Bridge of Sighs. The dusty glass was stained with tears.

He'd called in sick to work on Friday and then had cancelled on Marcos for dinner.

He'd tried to sleep through the night but had tossed and turned, his mind spinning through all his past moments with John. Dave knew he was being irrational, that he should snap out of it, that John was gone and wasn't coming back.

It made no difference. He was in relapse. Knowing this had happened to him before didn't make it any easier to climb out of now.

Someone knocked on the front door. Dave looked up but made no move to answer it.

They knocked again. "Dave, you in there?" It was Carmelina.

If he just stayed quiet, maybe she would leave.

She knocked one more time. Then silence returned.

He pulled a shirt out of the box and held it up. It was a plain gray T-shirt. Dave held it up to his face, burying his nose in it.

It still smelled like John.

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"Why don't you get something more colorful?"

John laughed. "I look good in gray and black."

"How about this one?" Dave held up a bright-red button-down short-sleeved shirt.

"No way. I can't wear red."

"I bet you'd look great in red."

"Nope. It brings out every zit and blemish on my face."

Dave grinned "You're crazy. I wear red all the time."

"You have beautiful Mexican skin. You can wear anything. I'm a winter."

"You don't even know what that is."

Dave stuck his tongue out. "I know what looks good on me." He kissed Dave and pulled two more dark gray T-shirts off the shelf. "Here, I'll get one of these." He held up another shirt.

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"That one's gray too!"

"But it's a blue gray."

Dave sat there holding the shirt for a long time while a bar of sunlight through the blinds chased dust bunnies across the floor.

Something woke him up. The jangle of a key in a lock. He looked up.

His front door creaked open. "Hello?"

"Dave, it's me." Marcos' voice. "Are you okay?"

When had he given Marcos a key? "Yeah. Okay. Just leave me alone."

Marcos poked his head through the doorway. "There you are." His tone changed. "Hey, what happened?" Marcos knelt beside him. "I called you all day yesterday, but you never responded."

"I... I just... I can't." He wished Marcos would just leave him alone.

"Hey, hey there... It's okay. It's me." He sank down next to Dave and picked up the photo in the black frame. "Who's this?"

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Dave squeezed his eyes shut. “John,” he whispered.

“John, the one...?”

Dave nodded. “He died five years ago.”

Marcos’ hand slipped around Dave’s shoulders, drawing him into an embrace.

He felt nothing. He was dead inside.

Marcos held him for a long time.

At last he said, “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Dave let himself be led to the shower. Marcos undressed him and got him under the warm water. It felt... not comforting, exactly. *Comfortable*. That was a good word.

Afterward, Marcos toweled him dry and led him back to the bedroom.

He climbed into bed, and Marcos joined him, spooning him, his chest warm against Dave’s back.

Something about that touch, about the warmth of Marcos’s skin, calmed him. He closed his eyes, content to just be still, to be warm and safe.

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Tomorrow. I'll deal with life tomorrow.

* * *

Something buzzed.

Marcos opened his eyes, looking blearily around the room. It had to be late afternoon, from the light slanting in through the blinds onto the olive-green walls. Carefully, he detached himself from Dave, trying not to wake him.

He picked up his phone. It was a text from Carmelina. *A bunch* of texts.

Need to talk.

Are you there?

It's important. Need to talk with you.

And ten more besides. He texted her back.

Sorry, taking care of Dave.

...

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Is he okay?

...

I think so.

...

Can I meet you for coffee? Tomorrow morning?

Marcos glanced over at Dave, who was sleeping soundly. They'd talk things over when he woke up. Besides, he could always cancel the coffee date if he had to.

I think so. 10 AM, the EG on J and 38th?

...

Perfect. see you there.

He wondered what was so important.

* * *

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Dave awoke to the sound of pots and pans. He sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bed. *What the hell?* Then it all came flooding back. The box, the picture. The emotional paralysis. He hadn't felt like that in... in five years. And then... Marcos.

He padded out of the bedroom through the tiny living room with its overloaded bookshelves and into the kitchen. Marcos was cooking eggs. "Hey, stranger."

Marcos jumped. "Holy shit. Don't do that to me!"

"Sorry." Dave sat at the kitchen table. "I must have been pretty out of it when you got here."

Marcos nodded. "I was worried about you. You didn't return my calls."

"How did you get in?"

"You showed me the key under the rock. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You hungry?"

Dave thought about it. "I'm starving, actually."

"Here you go." Marcos filled half of a plate with eggs and plopped down a couple of tortillas too.

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They were warm. “When I don’t have a comal, I cook them on the burner like my dad taught me. Orange juice?”

“Yes, please.”

They sat down together and attacked their plates. By the look of it, Marcos was as hungry as he was. The eggs were really good—fluffy with lots of cheese, just like Dave liked them.

“So... what happened?” Marcos asked at last, chewing his last forkful of eggs.

“It’s hard to explain. Sometimes everything’s just too much.”

“Like when you find a photo of your deceased partner?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I just shut down. My grandmother was like that too.” He looked out the kitchen window at the evening glow. “It’s happened to me four times before. The last one was right after John died.”

“I can imagine.”

“I get it if you want to run.”

“Run?”

“Away from me.”

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Marcos shook his head. “I *like* you, Dave. I’m not going to run just ‘cause you sometimes go into power-saving mode.”

Dave smiled. A little. “You *do* know this entitles you to a little of your own craziness.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Dave grinned and squeezed Marcos’s hand. “Something to look forward to.”

Marcos squeezed back. “I think I’m falling for you.” The expression on Marco’s face was naked and vulnerable, and it touched Dave.

In that moment, he felt *alive*. “Me too.”

83 - Broken Wing

Sam and Brad wrestled the heavy, solid wood desk out of Sam’s den. They’d cleared a place for it in the living room. *At least I’ll have a nice view of the street while I’m working.*

It was a beautiful mid-October day. He’d barely had a chance to look outside though. After

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they'd wrapped up their wedding planning in the morning, he'd spent a solid four hours working on his second book, *Across the Line*. He was on deadline, and he had enough time—barely, if he managed to get a chapter done every three days. That was going to be harder now, with the inevitable distractions of the wedding and their new house guest, but it would all be worth it.

“Why did I let you talk me into getting this monstrosity?” Brad asked, setting his end of the desk down in the doorway to the den.

“Because it's a *genyouuwine* antique? Because it only cost twenty-five dollars?”

Brad crossed his arms. “Nope, I don't think so.”

“Because you love me and put up with all my writerly eccentricities?”

“Bingo. Let's get this thing moved into place.” Brad tried to pick up his end of the desk again with a grunt. “Damn.” He set it down again with a heavy *thunk*. “We need help.”

“I can see if Jim's home.”

“Good idea. He's a strapping guy.” Brad whistled. “I wish I were still that nimble.”

Sam climbed over the desk into the hallway. “Damn, you're only thirty. You're not an old man, for God's sake.”

Brad laughed. “There's a lotta years between your twenty-three and my thirty.”

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Sam kissed his cheek. “You’ll always be young to me. Be right back.”

He swung open the front door and bounded down the stairs. It felt good to be outside.

Jim lived in the blue Victorian next door. He was a nice guy—bit of a silver fox, if Sam was honest. He liked sexy older guys, though he’d never tell Brad that. Not again. Made the poor guy feel old. Sam knocked on the door.

There were footsteps inside, and then Jim Oberkrom opened the door. “Hey Sam. What’s up?”

Sam grinned. “Moving a bit of furniture. We’ve got a houseguest coming and needed to make some room.”

Jim scratched the silver stubble on his chin and smiled. “Need a hand?”

Sam nodded. “Yes, please. If you’re not busy.”

“Nope. Just getting ready to go down to Fox and Goose for dinner with a couple of friends.”

“It’ll only take a moment.”

“Let me grab my keys. I’ll just leave for the restaurant from your place.”

“Perfect.” Sam watched him disappear down the hall. Yup. Good-looking guy. He and Brad really ought to find someone to fix Jim up with.

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“Okay, all set.” Jim pulled the door hard to close it and locked it behind him.

Sam couldn't help but notice the apple keychain. “You a farm-to-fork enthusiast?”

“What? Oh, this.” He held up the keychain. “Nope. Used to be an elementary teacher in South Sac. See?” It said, *World's Greatest Teacher*.

“High praise.” Sam bounded back down the stairs. “Come on. Let's get this over with.”

Back at home, he held the door open for Jim.

“Hey, Jim!” Brad shook Jim's hand. “Thanks for the assistance. This desk of Sam's is made out of gold bars or something.”

“Gold bars, huh? That's a helluva retirement plan you've got there. What do you want me to do?”

Sam chuckled. “You must have been popular with your students. Bet you always made them laugh. Let me climb over into the den.” Sam clambered over the top of the desk. “Okay, if you can help Brad with that end? It's the heavier side.”

“Sure. Happy to help.” He ran his hand along the smooth, polished wood. “This is a beautiful piece. Where did you find it?”

“Estate sale out in Granite Bay. Brad hates it.”

“No, I don’t. I just wish it didn’t weigh a ton.”

“Next time you go estate-sale shopping, let me know. I love hunting for hidden gems at those things.”

Sam grinned. “See? He gets it.”

“Well marry him, then,” Brad grunted.

They lifted it together on the count of three and managed to free the desk from the den.

They baby-stepped it forward together, then around the corner into the living room. Of course it was backwards, so between the three of them, they managed to turn it around, barely missing taking out a lamp and the corner of the dark leather sofa on the way.

Finally they backed it into place.

“You sure this is going to be okay?” Brad asked, worried. “He’s a writer,” he said to Jim.

Sam nodded. “Ricky can’t make it up the stairs for now. And maybe a change of scene will inspire me.” He was a little stuck on one of his protagonist’s motivations. But usually those things worked themselves out. Eventually. “Thanks, Jim, for the help. If we can ever return the favor—”

“I’m sure I’ll need it. Let’s grab some coffee sometime. You guys have been here for months, and I hardly know you.”

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“We’d love that.” Brad put out his hand, but Jim gave him a hug, then Sam too. “Welcome to the neighborhood, about a year late.”

“Have fun at Fox and Goose!”

When he was gone, Sam spent the next half hour moving the rest of his things out of the den.

He looked around at the empty room a little sadly. It was *his* space. he was going to miss it. But it was for a greater cause.

* * *

There was a knock at the door.

Brad opened it to find Ricky with his social worker, Connie Jenson. “Hey, Connie.”

“Hi, Brad. Mind if I come in and take a look around?”

“Sure. We have his room all ready. Sam, want to show her?” He’d set up a bed and a dresser they’d borrowed from some friends. The rest would come later.

“On it. This way.” Sam led the social worker to the new bedroom.

“Hi, Ricky.” Brad reached forward to hug the boy, then stopped. “Broken ribs. Right.”

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“Hi, Mr. W.” Ricky stepped inside and looked around the entry way and living room. “Nice.” The bruises around his eyes were still an angry dark purple, but the edges were fading a little to green and red.

“You’re looking better. Are you hungry?”

Ricky nodded. “They fed me lunch, but that was six hours ago.”

“Where are your things?”

“The john took it all. I didn’t have much.”

Brad shook his head and sighed. These poor kids went through so much. “Come on into the kitchen. We have dinner ready. Hope you like hamburgers.”

Ricky nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Connie popped her head out of the bedroom. “The room looks good, but you’ll need to get him some clothes and basic necessities. And he needs to be in school within the next seven days. This is a provisional placement. I’ll be stopping by a couple of times a week and unannounced times to check on him. And Ricky?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“If you need anything, call me.” She gave him a card. “Brad, can the Center help get Ricky a phone?”

Brad nodded. "We'll take care of it."

"Okay. Let me know the number when you do." She leaned forward and kissed Ricky lightly on the cheek. "Sam and Brad are good people. They will take care of you." Then she was gone, leaving only the faint smell of perfume like flowers in the air.

"Let's eat."

"Yeah, I'm starving," Sam said, giving the kid a reassuring smile.

Brad went to put a hand around the boy's shoulder, but he flinched away. "Hey, it's okay. You're safe here."

Ricky nodded, but he looked a little spooked.

There was more to heal here than a little bird's broken wing.

84 - Lord Love A Duck

Carmelina stood in front of the store window. On display was the most adorable pair of baby

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shoes, patent leather in pink and white. A little hand-lettered card next to them said "12 months." It was August 15th, 1976, one year to the day after Andrea's birth. One year to the day after Carmelina had done the most painful thing she could imagine: giving up her baby girl to a stranger.

Carmelina closed her eyes, holding out her hands and imagining Andrea in her arms, her voice gurgling, her brown eyes looking up at Carmelina. Andrea didn't have a clue what was coming next; she trusted her mother completely.

Despite Carmelina's own mother's assurance that she had done the right thing, she knew it would haunt her forever. That little face she might never see again.

Carmelina opened her eyes. Maybe this idea was foolish. Maybe she'd be better off finding a way to let go.

She pulled out her pocketbook and leafed through it. She had just enough to pay for the shoes if she skipped lunch the next couple of days. She would put them in the little blue box, and someday, maybe, she would give them to Andrea herself.

Decided, she pushed open the shop door, the bell announcing her intentions.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Emily Stamp closed her office door behind her, her voice startling Carmelina out of her reverie.

"That's okay. I'm not sure I'm ready for your news, to be honest." What if Emily hadn't found anything? *What if she had?*

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“I understand. This must be difficult for you.” She sat down behind her desk and leaned her chair back, entwining her fingers over her stomach. “Before we get started, can I ask you something?”

She's pregnant. Carmelina wasn't sure how she knew it. “Sure.”

“If your daughter had come looking for you, would you have wanted to meet her?”

“Absolutely.” It came out with a vehemence that surprised Carmelina, but there was really no doubt in her mind. “Why? Are you thinking of looking for your own mother?”

Emily looked out the window, a wistful expression on her face. “Maybe,” she said at last. “Dani and I are becoming parents ourselves, so motherhood has been on my mind a lot these days. I'm not sure I want to meet her though. She was an addict, from what I've learned. Do I want that in my life? In my child's life?” Emily shrugged. “Anyhow, enough about me.” She sat up and pulled a folder out of one of her desk drawers.

“You know who she is?”

Emily nodded. “One of the perks of the job. I'm my own personal PI.”

Carmelina leaned forward and took her hand. “I can't tell you if it's a good idea or not to meet her. I can only tell you that I would give everything I have for the chance to see my own daughter just *one more time*.”

Emily sniffed and wiped the corner of her eye. “I... Yes, good to know. I'll think about it. Now, should we talk about your granddaughter?”

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Carmelina sat back, a trickle of sweat running down her spine. “You found something, then?”

“More than something. I have her name and her adopted parents’ phone and address. I also pulled some public records. There are photos in there too.” She slid the folder across the desk. The tab said “Mary.”

Carmelina picked up the folder and held it to her chest. This was it. Her hands tingled, and she was suddenly suffused with an almost overwhelming anxiety tinged with joy.

She opened the folder. The first thing was a school photo of a beautiful blonde girl maybe seven or eight years old. “She’s beautiful.” Carmelina could see her own face in the girl’s features. She smiled and closed her eyes and kissed the photo, then set it aside. The next thing was a junior high transcript.

“I’m afraid I do have one bit of bad news.”

Carmelina looked up with a frown. “What?”

“She’s been placed in temporary foster care. I don’t know with whom. If you want, I can try to find out more.”

“What happened to her?” Was she a juvenile delinquent?

“Some kind of dispute with her parents.”

“Okay.” That was all right. One thing at a time. She turned back to the school transcript and started to read it. Carmelina’s heart raced. “That’s her name?”

“Yes. They changed it when she was adopted.”

She flipped through the file, searching for a more current photo. At the very back, there was a newspaper clipping dated August 2014. *High School Junior Wins Race.*

“Lord love a duck.” It was *her*.

Emily frowned. “That’s a reaction I’ve never seen before. What’s it mean?”

Carmelina closed the folder. “It means I think I know where to find her.”

“Well that’s a first.”

Carmelina laughed. She was *this close*. She thanked Emily and gave the woman a big hug. “You have no idea what you’ve done for me,” she said, squeezing her tight. “I hope you go see your own mother. Regardless of what might happen.”

“Thank you. I hope your reunion is everything you hoped for.” She closed her office door with an encouraging smile, hand on her stomach.

Carmelina let herself out of the lobby and descended the stairs to J Street.

Marcos. She needed to talk to Marcos. He would know what to do next.

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She grabbed a coffee at the Everyday Grind on 20th. Then she sent him a text. *Need to talk.*

There was no response. She sipped her coffee out on the boardwalk under the great oak tree, watching a cyclist in neon-green spandex cycle by.

Are you there?

So many things she wanted to say to her granddaughter. So many questions to ask.

It's important. Need to talk with you.

She lost track of how many times she texted him as the afternoon slipped by. She was just about to give up and head home when her phone *dinged*.

Sorry, taking care of Dave.

Is he okay?

... I think so.

Can I meet you for coffee? Tomorrow morning?

She waited anxiously for his response.

... I think so. 10 AM, the EG on J and 38th?

Perfect. see you there.

She'd waited forty years for this moment. Another seventeen hours wouldn't kill her.

85 - The Link

Diego put his hands on the coffin. He remembered the last time he'd seen Luna, the night she died.

She'd looked like an angel, her eyes closed in perfect peace, her pale white face and blonde hair perfectly arranged as she left this Earth.

She's already gone. The pale, stiff wraith inside the coffin was as much Luna as he was George Clooney. Still, one respected the dead, and one followed the forms.

He stretched in his borrowed suit. Valentina's friend Paolo was a little skinnier than he was, but Diego had been loathe to buy a brand-new suit for just this one occasion.

He stepped back to let Gio have some time with his mother.

Diego's sister Valentina put her arm around him and hugged him. "You okay?"

He nodded. "I'm ready to go home." He missed having Matteo to talk to, to figure all this stuff out.

Gio stood next to the coffin for a long time, his hand on the closed lid.

"It's been good to have you here, even under such dire circumstances," Valentina said softly. "Mamma's not getting any better."

He nodded. "I am lucky to have you here to look after her. I wish Claudia and Cinzia lived closer."

They shared a glance at their mother, dressed in her funeral-day finery, the same dress and veil she'd worn to his father's funeral years before. "I remember when we were all kids, and she would make us dress up for church. You never wanted to wear those frilly dresses."

She laughed. "And you had always skinned a knee—and your trousers—by the time we got home again. We were troublemakers."

As if on cue, little Dante chased Bianca past them, laughing and screaming.

Valentina caught Dante by the collar and hauled him backwards. "*Comportati!*" she hissed, depositing him on one of the pews. "Sit there and be quiet. You're embarrassing your family."

Dante sulked and fidgeted.

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Diego stifled a laugh. Their family members were about the only people here, so it would be hard for the boy to embarrass them. Luna had had no one, and only a few others, maybe friends and neighbors, had bothered to come.

At last, Gio turned away from the casket. "It's not her in there," he said flatly. "I'll be in the car." He brushed past Diego.

Valentina rubbed Diego's arm. "He's hurting. He'll come around."

"I hope so. Are we ready to go?" Diego just wanted to get this day over with.

"Sure." Valentina kissed his cheek. "*Forza*. Come on, Mamma. Time to go to the cemetery."

Diego took one more look at Luna, and then helped his mother up from the pew. He threw his arms around her and hugged her tightly. "*Ti voglio benissimo, Mamma.*"

"What's this for?" She squeezed him back.

"Just because."

* * *

They followed the hearse to the cemetery, driving past the white towers of the crematorium and onto the grounds, to Luna's final resting place inside a white marble mausoleum.

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It was a bright, sunny day, at odds with the sobriety of the ritual being enacted by the bereaved. Valentina parked as close to the mausoleum entrance as she could manage.

Diego helped his mother out of the car.

Gio sat in the back seat, playing a game on his phone.

“You coming?”

The boy looked up and nodded. He turned his phone off and joined Diego at the curbside.

The two of them helped the other pallbearers carry the casket to the mausoleum. The grass was soft from rain the day before, and Diego had to place his feet carefully with each step as they crossed the field to the tent. The last thing he needed was to trip and send Luna’s casket flying.

They entered the building, and Diego was struck by how serene and lifeless the place was. They set the casket down carefully, and the priest rose to speak.

“Luna Mazzocco was a wild spirit, one that passed from this Earth too soon. Her surviving family member, her son Giovanni, has provided roses. If you are so inclined, please take one and place it on the casket and take a moment to say your final goodbyes.” Diego stood and followed his sister to pay his last respects. He took a rose and laid it on top, whispering, “I’ll take care of him for you.” Then he stepped aside to let the others have their chance.

Diego closed his eyes, remembering the summer they had gotten married, when he was still young. When almost anything had seemed possible. As crazy as Luna was, she’d had a light in her. It had been her brilliant smile and uncensored laughter that had drawn him to her in the first place. It was still hard for him to believe she was gone.

He looked up. Everyone had gone to pay their respects except for Gio. "Gio," he whispered. "It's time."

"I can't." The boy looked up at him, and his eyes were red and wet.

"Come on." Diego held his hand out. "I'll do it with you."

Gio stared at him for a moment and then nodded, putting his hand in Diego's. He stood and walked slowly to the casket.

Diego handed him a rose. "Here. Say what you need to say."

Gio took it, and then threw it at the casket. "Why did you have to die?" he said, his voice raising to a scream. "Why did you leave me?" He hit the casket with his fists. "Why did you die?" His voice trailed off into a whisper.

Diego sighed. "Come on, kiddo. Let's take a walk."

Gio's face was red, but he nodded. He kissed the coffin and whispered something and then turned away, stone-faced.

Diego's heart broke for him. He put his arm around Gio's shoulder, and they exited the mausoleum into the sunlight. They walked down the road between the grassy sections of the cemetery. The sun was warm on Diego's shoulders, a bit of a breeze blowing the Italian cypress that lined the edge of the place. "You're right, Gio," he said at last, glancing sideways at his son. *My son*. "It sucks. The whole world sucks right about now."

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Geo nodded. "It does." His hands were in his pocket, and his face was gray,

"When my *papà* died, I cried for weeks." Diego took a deep breath. "Luna was a beautiful woman, and she loved you fiercely, you know. I see a lot of her in you—she'll always be a part of you. The best part of you."

"You do?"

He chuckled. "Yes. She was defiant, like you. She never let life keep her down for long. And you have her features."

"I wish she was still here."

Diego nodded at a man laying flowers on an old, crumbling headstone. "I know, Gio. I know." He squeezed the boy's shoulders. "Listen, I know I'm not her. But I'm here for you, and I'm not going to let you down."

Gio turned and threw his arms around Diego and began to cry, ugly sobs racking his whole body.

Diego rubbed his back. "There there. It's gonna be okay, son. It's all gonna be okay."

He remembered his own father saying just those words to him when his nonna had died. He was part of a chain, a link between his parents' generation and the next.

In that moment, he believed his own words. "It's all gonna be okay."

86 - Three For Coffee

Marcos waited anxiously at the Everyday Grind for Carmelina. He'd left his boyfriend at home. Dave seemed more himself this morning, and they'd spent a couple of hours chatting at breakfast. Now Marcos sat in the alcove by the front door, watching the traffic pass by along J Street.

A woman in pink-and-black spandex with gray, curly hair sat under a patio umbrella just outside the cafe, intent on her laptop screen. Was she writing a romance novel? Or a letter to a long-lost love? Or maybe a paper on particle physics? Two handsome young men walked by with a golden retriever on leash, talking and laughing, at the same time that a Harley roared by in the opposite direction. It was a gorgeous, sunny day. One more day without rain in the midst of the drought, but nice all the same.

He glanced at his watch. It was five after ten. Carmelina was late. What did she need to talk with him about? Was there something wrong? Then Carmelina walked past his window, a look of grim determination on her face. So it was something serious. Marcos got up to greet her as she came in. "Hey gorgeous," he said, giving her a hug. "I grabbed a latte while I was waiting."

"Oooh, that looks good." She managed a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I'll get myself one too. Be right back."

Marcos looked around. It was usually quiet, and today was no exception. The EG had a warm, friendly vibe, from its African wall art to its warm earth tones and friendly staff. He'd come to think of this one as "his" Everyday Grind. It was closest to home, and the baristas all knew him by name.

Carmelina returned a moment later with a steaming mug of coffee and a biscotti. "Were you

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waiting long?" She sat down in her chair, putting her oversized blue-and-gold shoulder bag on the table.

"About ten minutes."

"I'm not taking you from work, am I?" She frowned.

"A little, but that's okay. It can wait."

"You sure?" She nibbled on her cookie.

"Yes."

"Dave okay too?"

"Yes! Enough stalling. What's this about? You have me all worried."

For her response, she took a sip of her coffee, staring at him through the steam for a moment as if judging his mood. She set down the mug. "You know I've been looking for my granddaughter?"

He nodded. "Your daughter was adopted, and something happened?"

"She was killed by a drunk driver."

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“That’s right. I’m so sorry.”

She smiled wanly. “Thank you. It’s an old pain. The loss. I didn’t know she was killed until recently.... I guess I always hoped she would come find me, one day. When she was ready.”

“Of course. That must have been terrible news to hear.” He put his hand on hers. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Mostly.” She pulled her hand away and put her palms around the coffee cup as if soaking in its warmth. “I hired someone to find my granddaughter.”

He nodded. He would have done the same. “Did they find her?”

She nodded. “Yes. I just met the investigator yesterday.”

“That’s amazing! Oh my God, I’m so thrilled for you.” Marcos grinned from ear to ear. “I was so nervous about this whole meeting thing. You had me really worried, being all secretive and shit. Will you get to meet her soon?” He tried to imagine it, meeting someone you’d thought was lost forever.

“That depends on you.” She reached her hand inside her bag, pulling out a manila folder and handing it to him.

Uncomprehending, he opened it. Inside, there was a picture of a little girl. “She’s beautiful, but I’m not sure what this has to do—”

“Keep going.”

Next was a school transcript. He picked it up. *Not bad, all in all, grade-wise.* “So her name is...” He froze.

“Marissa.”

He looked up at Carmelina, a torrent of emotions running through him: incredulity, disbelief, shock, and anger. “She can’t be.”

“Keep going.”

He turned back to the folder. Further on, there was a news article and a few more pictures. It was her, *his* Marissa. “Is the investigator sure?”

She nodded. “As sure as she can without DNA. She has the records.”

Marcos shook his head. This couldn’t be happening. He and Marissa were a family now. She’d become an inseparable part of his life in the last month. Sure, he’d known the court might see things differently when her adoptive parents were in the room. But this... this was something he’d never expected.

“I know this is a lot to process. I was as shocked as you. I don’t want to come between you two. You’ve been just what Marissa needed.”

“Then what *do* you want?” He would fight for Marissa if he had to.

“I want to talk to her.” She stared at him, unblinking. “She’s my blood.”

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He closed his eyes, feeling the moisture gathering at the corners of his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm thrilled for you, I really am. But Marissa and I..." *Marissa and I are what?* He had no parental rights here. He was a foster parent to her, no more.

"Marcos, look at me." Carmelina took his hands in hers, squeezing them tight. "I don't want to take her away from you. Hell, I don't want to raise a child. I know what a pain in the ass they are." She let go of his hands and sat back, her smile fading. "I just want her to know she has family. I want to be her grandmother. Her nonna. My own family is all gone."

He blinked. For just a moment, his own grandmother Consuela sat there in Carmelina's place, smiling at him, her salt-and-pepper hair looking like she'd just come from the salon, her gold-rimmed glasses framing her face. "I love you, Mijo," she whispered.

Marcos blinked again and she was gone, but he knew what she meant. He took a deep breath. "You *should* be a part of her life. You both deserve that."

"Are you sure? You're okay with this?" Carmelina's hands trembled in her lap.

"Yes. I am. I will be." He exhaled, letting go of his fear. "Oh my God, you're Marissa's grandmother!"

She laughed. "I am, right?" She got up and gave him a bear hug.

He hugged her back. "When do we tell her?"

"This afternoon at Ragazzi?"

“Too many people. Let’s take her somewhere after.” Marcos closed his eyes, missing the sparkle that enveloped them both for just a moment, but he felt its magic.

87 - How To Make A Good Sauce

Brad’s hands were covered in flour.

He’d let Sam talk him into coming to this cooking class for their *big reveal*—Sam’s words—and now he was kneading enough potato dough to make what seemed like a hundred thousand gnocchi.

“You’re cute like that.” Sam kissed his cheek, possibly the only part of his body not powdered with flour. Sam had been in charge of boiling the potatoes and had gotten off scot-free in the flour department.

Carmelina was kneading the dough next to him, attacking it with a single-minded ferocity.

“Hey, go easy on that. That dough didn’t do anything to you.” Something was eating at her.

She laughed, but it was a bit strained. She kept looking at Marissa and Tris, who Matteo had put to work making sauce. Ricky was there too, but he hung back a bit from the pair. He was worried for the kid.

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“Something wrong?” Brad whispered, indicating the couple.

“No.” She wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. “Just thinking.”

Brad glanced down at his own dough. It was still a floury mess, while hers looked like it was ready to... to cut? To bunch up in little balls? He had no idea how one actually made gnocchi from the stuff.

“You ready?” Sam whispered in his ear.

“Now?” Seriously, Sam wanted to do this while he was covered in flour?

Sam laughed. “Why not?”

“Um, sure.” He’d thought to do it around the dinner table, but this did feel like a *family* moment. “You want to?”

“You go ahead. You’re the one who proposed.”

Brad grinned. He had a hard time believing this was all going by so fast. He cleared his throat. “Excuse me, everyone... Sam and I have a bit of an announcement.” He looked over at Ricky. “Well, two, actually. Ricky Martinez, the handsome young guy standing there with Marissa and Tris, is coming to live with us.”

Ricky blushed, but he managed a bow and a side grin that just made him more adorable.

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“And second, Sam and I have decided to get married.”

Carmelina grabbed him in an unexpected hug that sent a cloud of flour into the air. “Oh my God, I am so thrilled for you guys.”

Brad coughed, waving flour away from his eyes as he struggled to breathe. “Thanks.”

She let go of him and squeezed his arms gently, her eyes getting a little teary around the edges.

“The wedding’s in two weeks—on Sunday the first. Matteo and Diego have agreed to let us hold it right here, at Ragazzi.”

Matteo held up a glass of wine in salute. “*Siamo contenti di avervi.*”

Brad grinned. “I’ll pretend to know what that means.”

“Who proposed?” It was Marcos, who had brought his partner, Dave.

“I did.”

“Did you get down on your knees and everything?” Carmelina’s eyes were shining.

“Well, one of them.” He looked around the room. “Some of you we have known for a long time. Some of you are new friends. But you all have become our family. Sam? The invitations?”

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“Oh, right.” Sam dug into his backpack and pulled out the brightly colored envelopes. “One for each of you, courtesy of RuPaul.” He handed them out. “We hope you all can make it. We know it’s short notice. Matteo, when does Diego return?”

The usually affable Italian frowned. “This week.”

The room went back to work, and one by one, their friends came up and gave each of them a hug. Last of all, Sam hugged and kissed him again. “I can’t wait to marry you,” he whispered in Brad’s ear.

When Sam let go, he was covered in flour, as was the rest of the room.

“Looks like it’s gonna be a white wedding,” Dave said dryly, dusting flour off his black shirt.

* * *

Carmelina washed her hands off in the sink, glancing over her shoulder now and again at Marissa. Now that she knew Marissa was her granddaughter, she could see the resemblance; the curve of her nose, the way she pushed her hair back behind her ear. So what if they said mannerisms weren’t inherited?

Was that what Andrea had looked like at her age?

Carmelina had missed so much in the last forty-odd years. She was anxious to tell Marissa who she was. To not miss anything else.

“Hey.”

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Marcos's voice in her ear made her jump, and she splashed him with water.

"Hey!" He wiped off his face.

"Sorry. I'm just... you know."

He followed her gaze. "Yeah. I know. We'll talk to her this afternoon together."

She nodded. "I know the waiting shouldn't matter. It's just a couple of hours. But still..."

"You want to run over there and throw your arms around her."

Her face was hot. "Yeah. I do."

"So? Go help her with the sauce."

"Yeah?"

"Why not? You two are friends." He gave her a playful shove.

"Sure we are," she muttered, not entirely convinced. She dried off her hands on her apron, picking up a little more flour, but she didn't care.

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She tapped Tristan on the shoulder. "Mind if I cut in?"

He smiled. "Sure, why not?" He kissed Marissa. "I'm gonna go keep Ricky company. He looks lonely."

"Good idea."

"How's it coming?" Carmelina picked up a wooden spoon and dipped it into the sauce to take a taste. "Oooh. Not bad. Needs some more basil."

"But Matteo said..."

Carmelina put a hand around Marissa's shoulder. "We're the cooks, right?" she said with an impish smile.

Marissa laughed. "I guess we are."

"Hand me some of that fresh basil."

Marissa grabbed a handful.

"I prefer to tear the basil leaves by hand. It smells so wonderful, and you know you've been cooking when you're done." She demonstrated. "Smell." She held her fingers under Marissa's nose.

"Oooh, that smells good."

Carmelina nodded. “Doesn’t it? You can never have too much basil.” She tasted the sauce again. “Needs a bit more garlic too, I think. Garlic you have to use a knife for.” She slammed the garlic down on the cutting board and it popped into a dozen cloves. Then she showed Marissa how to chop it.

“How do you know how to do this? Make a good sauce, chop the garlic just right, all of it?” Marissa asked, dropping the garlic into the sauce by hand. She tasted it and a broad grin split her face. “It’s really good.”

“My grandmother taught me everything she knew about Italian cooking.” Carmelina kissed the girl on the forehead.

Just as I plan to teach you.

Recipes courtesy of Fabrizio Montanari and his mother and grandmother.

Potato Gnocchi

Ingredients:

- 2-1/2 pounds potatoes

- 1 cup flour

- 1 egg

- salt

Wash the potatoes under running water. Steam-cook them or boil them in salty water for 40 minutes. As soon as they are done, remove them, let them cool a little, peel them, and put them in a large bowl and mash them. Let them cool.

Add finely sifted flour, the egg, a pinch of salt, and knead the dough until you make a firm and elastic dough. Divide the dough into four parts and work them one by one.

On a cutting board covered with flour, roll the dough until you have a long rolled piece of dough about 3/4 of an inch thick.

Cut it with a knife into pieces about 3/4 of an inch long and use your thumb to press each one gently onto the flat tines of a fork to make a pattern.

Shake off the extra flour and put the gnocchi in a large pot of boiling salty water. Cook them until they float up to the top, which usually takes about two-to-four minutes.

Remove them using a slotted spoon and drain well, then put them in a saucepan with your favorite sauce, cooking both together for about two minutes. Serve hot.

To store gnocchi, place them on parchment paper or a floured cloth, separated so that they don't touch. Otherwise, they will stick together.

This recipe makes enough gnocchi for four-to-five people.

To make the best gnocchi, it's important to use the right amount of flour. Too much, and the gnocchi will be too hard; too little, and they will melt when you cook them.

To freeze gnocchi, place the tray in the freezer for half an hour and then put the gnocchi into a freezer bag. They should remain good for about six months.

88 - It's Kinda Nice

While the gnocchi were cooking, Marissa slipped away to sit down with Ricky and Tris. She hadn't seen Ricky since the day at the hospital four days earlier.

Ricky and Tris were sitting alone in a corner of the restaurant. Ricky's broken ribs made it difficult for him to exert himself much, even for cooking.

The two guys were deep in conversation. Marissa slipped into the chair next to them. "Hey, Ricky, how are you?" she said when there was a pause in the conversation.

"I'm okay. Better, I think. The doctors say it will be a couple of months before I'm all healed." He tapped his rib cage gently.

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“Did they find the guy who did it?” She was still angry with him for taking a chance like that, but you couldn’t say anything when someone was injured.

Ricky shook his head. “Not yet.”

Tris took her hand. “Did you know Ricky used to be a... what did you call it?”

“Hustler.”

“Yeah, that. That he had sex for money?”

Marissa nodded. “Yeah, I did.” She had to remind herself that Tris had no experience with homelessness. Or the homeless. “There are a lot of kids on the street who don’t have any other way to survive. Ricky was luckier than most. He had a steady guy.”

“A *sugar daddy*, right?” Tris looked inordinately proud of himself.

Marissa laughed. “Yeah. That. Until he got dumped and then picked up the wrong guy.” She glared at Ricky.

“Hey, I didn’t *know* he was the wrong guy,” Ricky protested.

She sighed. “So how’s the new place?”

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“With Sam and Brad?” Ricky smiled. “Not bad. I have my own room, and Brad’s a decent cook.” He shrugged. “I just keep waiting for it all to go away, you know? It always ends.”

“Brad’s a good guy.” But she knew what he meant. Ricky had been through a dozen foster homes before going it alone on the street. Some had been decent. Some... some he never wanted to talk about.

She glanced over at Carmelina. The woman waved back at her.

“She’s being really weird today.” Marissa liked Carmelina, but this was starting to verge on stalking. Still, there was something about her that Marissa felt drawn to, something warm.

“Tell me about it,” Ricky said, looking over at Sam and Brad. “They’re insta-parents. Every five minutes they’re checking in on me. Am I okay? Do I want some water? Something to eat? How do my ribs feel?” He snorted. “It’s annoying.”

“It’s kinda nice though, right?” Marissa liked having her own room again, a bed, and a place to shower that wasn’t shared with a hundred others.

Ricky sighed. “Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

* * *

“Dinner is served.” Matteo held up the wide, shallow platter painted with yellow lemons that he and Diego had bought in Amalfi together. The gnocchi were piled up high, covered in fresh basil and the sauce Marissa and Carmelina had made.

Matteo had arranged the tables together into one long one in the middle of the room, enough to

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seat sixteen. He set the gnocchi in the middle, and Carmelina brought out the fresh, hot garlic bread and a green salad. He still wasn't used to the whole bread-and-salad-first nonsense, but when in America...

Everyone gathered around the table and took their seats. The salad, bread, and pasta went around, and a soft chatter filled the room, the sound of good friends getting reacquainted after a week's absence.

Matteo was reminded of his own family meals—his grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins all gathered around the dinner table *la tavola*—for a communal meal in his parents' tiny dining room. Always full of so much life and activity.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Carmelina said.

He nodded. "In Italian, we say, '*A tavola non si invecchia.*' At the table, one doesn't age."

"Oooh, I like that." Carmelina shuffled some salad onto her plate and handed him the bowl. "We have our own little Italian family here."

Our own little family. She was right. Somehow, they'd created a family out of nothing here on these foreign shores.

Only one thing was missing. His Diego.

He took a spoonful of gnocchi for himself and a little bread.

"Hey, are you okay?" Carmelina was staring at him.

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“It’s nothing.”

She squeezed his arm. “I’m really good at listening.”

He knew that look. She wouldn’t give this up until he gave her an answer. Matteo sighed. “I just found out that Diego has a son. Gio.” It weighed on him.

“Damn. And you didn’t know?”

“No.”

“Was it while you two were—”

“Yes. Gio’s seventeen.” He shook his head. “I should be supportive of him and Gio, but it’s hard. What Diego did—you probably think I’m a terrible person.”

She gave him a hug. “Not at all. I understand better than you know,” she whispered.

“Thank you.” He felt a little better having told someone, but he wondered what she meant. “Would you excuse me a moment?”

“Sure. If you ever need to talk, I’m here.”

He kissed her cheek. “*Grazie, bella.*”

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He made his way upstairs and pulled out his cell phone. It was midnight in Italy, but he needed to talk to Diego. He was a night owl, anyway, so he'd probably still be awake.

"Pronto," Diego said. He sounded half asleep.

"Ciao, Diego. It's Matteo."

"What time is it?" Diego asked in Italian, not English.

Matteo let it go. Diego was in Italy, after all. "About midnight, where you are."

"Is everything okay?" He sounded alarmed. "Is the restaurant—"

"Everything's fine. I just wanted to call and tell you I love you."

"Gio—"

"I'm still angry with you. But we'll work it out." *We always do.*

"Okay."

"Go back to sleep. I'll see you at the airport on Tuesday."

“*Ti amo.*”

“*Ti amo di più.*”

He hung up the phone and stared at it for a moment. It was good to hear Diego’s voice, but they still had a lot to talk about when he came home.

Matteo slipped the phone into his pocket and went back downstairs to rejoin his new family.

89 - News

Carmelina's hands shook.

She put them on her lap under the table where no one could see them. *Deep breaths.*

She should have ordered a decaf. The caffeine in her espresso was doing nothing to help calm her nerves. Besides, she really shouldn’t be so nervous. She’d known Marissa for a month now. Well, twenty-eight days was close enough. Five Sundays.

But she *hadn’t* known that Marissa was her granddaughter.

The door to the Everyday Grind swung open.

Deep breath.

“Hey there,” Marcos said. His eyes darted back and forth, as if he was planning his exit, just in case.

“It’ll be fine,” she whispered in his ear as she hugged him, projecting a confidence she didn’t feel. “Hey, Marissa.”

“Hey.” The girl gave her a diffident hug and settled into a seat with her phone, texting with one hand.

“I’m going to grab us a couple of drinks. Marissa?”

“Skinny Mocha, please.” She didn’t look up.

Marcos shrugged and went to fetch drinks.

Carmelina sat back and tried not to stare at the girl. Marissa had already seemed a little uncomfortable at their closeness back at Ragazzi. Carmelina didn’t want the girl to think she was a stalker.

Marissa finished her text and put her phone down on the round marble table. She looked up at Carmelina and gave her a half smile. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that... you remind me of someone.”

“Oh yeah? That’s weird.” Her phone buzzed, and she picked it up again and glanced at the screen, then started another text.

She looked so much like Carmelina had at that age.

“Is that Tristan?”

“Yeah. He wants to do something tonight.”

“He seems like a nice kid.”

“Yeah. I like him.” Her hand raced across the screen.

Carmelina envied her that. Texts always took her a long time to type, even on a smartphone. And she was always screwing things up, losing emails, deleting apps. It all made her feel terribly old.

“Here we are.” Marcos reappeared with a couple of paper cups. “One mocha for you.” He handed a cup to Marissa. “And a double grind for me.” He sat down next to Marissa, stretching his legs. “Did I miss anything?”

Carmelina shook her head. “Marissa has been busy.”

“Sorry.” She put her phone in her pocket and looked up. “Okay, done. Marcos said you wanted

to talk to me?”

Carmelina had a whole speech practiced. How sometimes adults made bad decisions and lived to regret them. About Arthur’s death and her search for connections. About how sometimes what you were looking for turned out to be right under your nose after all.

She threw it out the window. It was now or never. “Marissa, I’m your grandmother.”

* * *

How about dinner at MD?

Marissa could *feel* Carmelina staring at her.

Marcos had been really sly about what she wanted to talk about. Maybe she needed someone to house sit, or something?

Sounds good. I’ll text you later.

“Sorry.” She put her phone in her pocket. “Okay, done. Marcos said you wanted to talk to me?”

Carmelina reached out to take her hand. “Marissa, I’m your grandmother.”

What the hell? “Um... What do you mean?” Her mother was dead. Her stepmonster had told her so. Some kind of car accident. How could Carmelina think they were related?

“I... I gave away my daughter—your mother—for adoption four decades ago. I just found out that she was killed in an auto accident just after you were born and that you existed. I didn’t know....”

Marissa pulled her hand away. All her life, she’d wished her *real* mother would find her. That she’d be alive, and that she would sweep in and take Marissa away from that awful, stuffy home in the suburbs. But *this?*

“Where were you? All those years? And why should I believe you, anyway?”

Carmelina nodded, her eyes wet. “Look, I know it’s hard to accept. I had a private investigator look into your identity. She gave me these....” Carmelina handed her a manila folder.

Marissa took it, leafing through it. There were pictures of her, including an old article about a track race she’d won the year before. She stared at them in disbelief. *Why now? Why after all these years, when her life was finally going right? She liked living with Marcos. She hardly knew Carmelina at all. “I don’t... I can’t.”* She threw the folder back at Carmelina, getting up so fast she knocked the chair over backwards.

“Marissa!” Marcos looked angry and embarrassed at her behavior.

She couldn’t stand it. Not *that*. Not from *him*. “I’m sorry. I have to go.” She ran out the door, past a startled woman reaching for the handle. “Sorry,” she mumbled, and ran down the street, her eyes nearly blinded by tears.

* * *

Marcos got up to set the chair upright and started to run after her.

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“Let her go,” Carmelina said, her voice sounding tired.

“Are you sure?” Marcos sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said, sitting down. “Maybe I should have talked to her first. Prepared her somehow.”

Carmelina snorted. “How do you prepare someone for news like that?” She took a sip of her coffee. “Besides, she’s right to be angry. I *should* have gone looking for my daughter earlier—much earlier. Maybe then I would have found
her
.”

Marcos stared at the door, still not entirely convinced he should have let Marissa go. “Why didn’t you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess I had myself convinced it was for the best. That her life was better without me.” She set down her cup. “And there was Arthur too. He never knew.”

“Are you sure she’ll be all right?”

Carmelina nodded. “Give her time. She needs to process it. When she’s ready, she’ll come back.”

“How do you know?”

Now she smiled. “She’s a lot like me.”

“Wait, I have that Find Friends app thing.” He unlocked his phone and opened the app. “I can see where she’s going. See?” He held up his phone triumphantly. At least he could keep an eye

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on her from afar.

“Looks like she’s heading for midtown. Wait.... Where’d she go?”

Marcos looked at his phone. Marissa’s dot was gone. “That’s weird.” He closed the app and reopened it. Nothing.

“She doesn’t want you tracking her.”

“Shit.” Carmelina was right. Marissa had an independent streak. She must have turned it off.

She was like a daughter to him. The thought of her coming to harm...

He’d give her a couple of hours, and then he would call her.

If she didn’t answer... well, he’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

He had a good idea where he would find her.

90 - Scars

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Marcos stared at his watch and then at the door to his condo. It was nine p.m. already, and Marissa hadn't come home. She had school the next day.

"I'm sure she's okay." Dave wrapped his arms around Marcos from behind and gave him a hug. He'd come over to keep Marcos company and to keep him from chewing his nails off while he waited. Neither effort had been wholly successful.

"I hope so. Maybe we shouldn't have ambushed her with it." How had he gotten so attached to her in such a short time?

"You had to tell her someday." Dave shook his head, whistling. "Never would have guessed Carmelina had a grandkid."

"She never talked about it?" The two were close.

"Nope. I guess it's something she kept buried deep."

Nine-oh-five. This was getting ridiculous. "I'm going out."

"Want me to come with?"

Marcos shook his head. "I need to find her and talk to her alone. She trusts me." He shook his head. "Well, she did. Before..." Now he was second-guessing his decision to tell her the way they had, to not break it to her more gently. "Anyhow, I think I know where to find her."

Marcos stood in front of Twink again, the tattoo shop where he'd found Marissa three-and-a-half

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weeks earlier.

Lucca was doing a brisk business next door, people enjoying the restaurant's shaded patio in the unusually warm weather.

Marcos took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

"Be right with you," Rex said without looking up. The artist was working on someone's back, doing a pink polka-dot mushroom for what looked to be an extensive magical forest scene.

"Hey, Rex, it's Marcos."

Rex glanced up. "Oh, hey." He went back to work. "Marissa's in the back."

Marcos nodded. He'd figured she would come here, the last safe place she had known before he took her in. Here or with Tris, and the boy had denied any knowledge of her current whereabouts.

Marcos pushed his way through the black bead curtain that separated the back of the shop from the studio.

There was a bathroom on the left and a storeroom on the right and a closed door at the back of the hall.

He knocked, admiring the art that decorated all the walls—designs from the tattoo books he'd leafed through the last time he was here.

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After a moment, the door swung open.

Marissa stared up at him, smelling like bubble gum. "You can save the pep talk. I'm happy here."

She tried to close the door, but he held it open. "Look, I just want to talk with you for a minute."

She shrugged and let him push open the door.

The room held a desk and chair, a bookshelf full of notebooks, and a mattress in one corner. A vape pipe lay on the concrete floor at the edge of the mattress. That explained the bubble gum smell. "Nice place."

She shrugged. "It's better than sleeping on the street."

"Yeah, I can see that."

She sat down on the mattress, her back against the wall. She picked up the pipe and offered it to him.

"No thanks."

She shrugged and gestured for him to join her. "So, talk."

Marcos sat down next to her, ignoring the cloyingly sweet smell. He closed his eyes, trying to remember what it had been like at Marissa's age. When he was always talked *to* and talked *ab*

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out

. Never talked

with

. “Why did you run away?” he asked at last.

“I told you. My parents—”

“No, I mean, why did you take off this afternoon? What spooked you?”

She stared at him for a long moment, then looked away. “She wanted to take me away.”

“Who? Carmelina?”

She nodded. “I was just feeling safe with you. Happy. I should have known it couldn’t last.”

She feels safe with me. That made him feel a little better. He reached over and touched her forehead with his index finger, running it lightly down her face. “You have this scar running across the middle of your life. This broken place where you used to feel loved, protected.”

She shrugged again. “I guess. Everyone’s broken somehow.”

He nodded. “Scar tissue helps protect us. It makes us stronger where we used to be weak. It puts things back together that got cut apart.” He had his own share of scars, some of them physical, most of them on his psyche. “But scars numb you too, deaden your nerves, make you forget what it felt like to be whole. It’s a constant dead zone, a reminder of the hurt you went through.”

She was silent, but her eyes were locked on his.

He picked up her left hand in his. "I'm scarred too. My parents threw me out when I was your age, and I spent the next twenty-five years scared to let anyone in." He'd opened up to both Marissa and Dave, and now he was scared to death to lose one or both.

"I can't get hurt like that again," she whispered.

"I know. When I took you in, I promised you'd be safe. I meant it. That hasn't changed. You can stay with me for as long as you want."

Marissa looked doubtful.

"I talked with Carmelina for an hour after you left. She wants to be your grandmother, not your mother. She just wants to know you better. She has her own scars from losing your mother."

"What happened?"

He shook his head. "I don't know much. She gave her daughter away when she was about your age, and she never saw her again."

"Just like my mother."

"Those circumstances were a bit different." He squeezed her hand. "The scarred have a special affinity for one other. We know what it feels like to be hurt, to be broken by someone we love. The three of us—you, me, Carmelina—we share a bond."

"I don't know—"

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Marcos picked up his backpack off the floor and unzipped it. "I brought this guy for you." He held up Nathan, her teddy bear.

"I'm too old for teddy bears." Still, he could see a little light in her eyes as she stared at it.

He laughed. "I'm sorry to hear that. I still have mine. His name is Andy, and I hug him whenever I need a little love." He held out the stuffed animal to her.

She took Nathan hesitantly, then held him tight.

"You have your key?"

She nodded.

"You're a grown woman, or near enough. You get to make your own decisions, so I'll leave it up to you. You and Nathan always have a place with me and Dave." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I hope you come home."

He got up and left her there. She was almost eighteen. It was time she started to make her own decisions, but walking out of that room was one of the hardest things he had ever done.

He headed home, managing not to cry for most of the drive, and went to bed with Dave, spooning his other love and trying to put Marissa out of his mind. Eventually he managed to sleep.

In the morning, he got up early and tiptoed out of his room and down the hall.

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He opened Marissa's door just a crack, and breathed a great sigh of relief when he found her and Nathan sound asleep together in her bed.

Check back in two weeks for the next part of the story – published the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month.

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