

KATE McMURRAY

The
STARS

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TREMBLE



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“*Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma! Tu pure, o Principessa, nella tua fredda stanza, guardi le stelle
che tremano d’amore, e di speranza!*”

“No one shall sleep! No one shall sleep! Not even you, o Princess, in your cold bedroom, watch
the stars that tremble with love and hope!”

—Giacomo Puccini, *Turandot*

ONE

THE girl had the voice of an angel.

Gio could say that with some authority, since there had been a time when many people had said the same about him.

But this girl. She was tiny, maybe four foot eleven, and very fine-boned, and her application indicated she was fourteen years old even though she barely looked a day over ten. Gio eyed the rows of parents sitting in folding chairs or on the floor off to the side of the studio and tried to guess which of them this girl belonged to. Probably an overbearing helicopter mom. There were a dozen of those in the crowd of parents. Usually, you could spot the one who belonged to the auditioning kid because she sat forward in her seat and mouthed the words along with her child. But, no, in this case, all of the moms looked on either with disinterest or in naked shock that such a big sound had come out of such a tiny girl.

Gio was sympathetic to the latter feeling.

Although, there was one person in the crowd of parents who caught Gio's attention, a handsome man who seemed a little out of place. He was *very* handsome. He had messy brown hair and a square jaw, wide shoulders atop a strong body, and he wore gray trousers and a blue button-front shirt as if they were jeans and a T-shirt. Gio wished he hadn't noticed the man, because now he'd be distracted through the rest of the auditions.

But back to the matter at hand.

"Miss McPhee," he said. "That was really lovely. Would you indulge me by singing that last part again, starting with 'Tu che di gel sei cinta'? Okay?"

She nodded and launched back into the Puccini aria. Her Italian was pretty good. It wasn't perfect, which indicated to Gio that she'd learned the aria by listening to recordings and mimicking rather than really understanding and learning to correctly pronounce the words, but he could work with that. Because this girl was *it*. She would be his protégé, his muse, the next great star of the Metropolitan Opera!

And she was only fourteen.

Tiny Emma McPhee finished singing. The faculty panel, Gio included, applauded her enthusiastically. She bowed and moved back to the area where the other potential students of the great Giovanni Boca's opera workshop were waiting. She glanced toward the crowd of parents, probably looking for her mother, but then she took her seat and chatted with another girl.

"Have you ever?" said Dacia, who was sitting next to him. She leaned close and blocked the parents' view of them by holding up a piece of paper. Her eyes were wide.

"She's mine," Gio said.

“I thought you might say that.” Her expression turned wry. “You want her to be *la tua stella*.”

“Sì,” he said. “*Ha la voce*.” Gio knew without a doubt this girl had the voice to be a star.

Dacia nodded. She threw her long, dark-gray hair over her shoulder and softly crooned a few notes in her smoky mezzo voice. She put the paper down and said, “*Avanti*. Let us continue.”

The next hour passed the way these auditions always passed: there was a mix of kids aged thirteen to seventeen, some of whom were terrible, some of whom had a bit of vocal talent, and some of whom had the raw material but needed refinement. Emma McPhee remained the only shoo-in for the workshop, although Gio had made a list of potentials and had pretty much decided on his twelve students by the time the auditions were winding down. The other faculty members on the audition committee always forced Gio into the song and dance with head shots, vague remembrances of their performances from people with bad recall, and usually Sam, the violin teacher, said lecherously of some talentless girl, “But she’s just so beautiful,” as if beauty had ever actually been linked to skill. Gio indulged them because he figured he shouldn’t bite the hand that fed him, since the Olcott School continued to employ him every year, but the final decision was still his.

He tuned out a particularly bad audition by mentally listing who he wanted in his class. He scrawled notes on his pad about why he wanted each one in case Sam or Dacia or even Jules, the quiet pianist, somehow thought a teenager with middling talent belonged in the most prestigious workshop in the city for young singers. And then, mercifully, the last audition was over.

Dacia stood and announced that the faculty was going to meet for about an hour to discuss and then the accepted singers would be posted on the bulletin board outside of Gio’s studio. She welcomed them to stick around or go grab a bite to eat and come back.

Gio stood, ready to shuffle into his office for an hour of nonsense, but he caught little Emma McPhee jogging across the room and then, much to Gio’s surprise, throwing her arms around the handsome man who had been distracting Gio for the better part of the audition process.

Merda.

Gio considered walking right up to the man and informing him that his daughter was definitely getting a spot in the workshop, just to get a closer look, but Dacia hooked her hand around his elbow and pulled him away.

A miserable forty-five minutes ensued in which three kids were obviously in, six were mostly agreed on without controversy, and three were furiously debated. Gio wanted a sixteen-year-old tenor with a voice like honey, but Sam wanted a soprano from New Jersey because, of course, “She’s just so pretty.”

“So we’re clear,” Gio said, “this is Giovanni Boca’s opera workshop, not Collective Olcott Music Faculty’s workshop. In my opinion, yes, Julie is a very pretty girl, but Tyler has the real potential here. His voice is a little thin right now, but he has a good sense of pitch and rhythm, and he can work with that. Julie was a half step sharp through most of her audition.” Luckily, Dacia and Jules sided with Gio, so he got his way in the end.

Needing some air outside of his stuffy office, Gio volunteered to go hang up the list. His assistant typed it up and printed it, and Gio took it and a pushpin to the bulletin board outside of his studio. About two-thirds of the prospective students and their parents were milling around in the hallway.

Gio spotted Emma McPhee with that man—her father, presumably, although there wasn’t a great deal of resemblance—and he smiled at the guy, who just looked back, biting his lip. There was something endearing about that. Surely he knew how much talent his daughter—or whoever she was—

had.

He cleared his throat and said, "If your name is on this list, my assistant Angela will be mailing you or your parents with a class schedule and syllabus within the next forty-eight hours. Everyone else, better luck next time."

He posted the list and barely got out of the way before the horde descended. He managed to catch Emma's attention and crooked his finger, inviting her to follow him down the hall. The man trailed after her.

"I wish I had spared you the wait," Gio said, which got him two horrified expressions in return. He laughed softly. He probably could have said that more nicely. "You were in from the moment you opened your mouth. I haven't heard a voice like that in quite some time. I look forward to working with you, Miss McPhee."

Her eyes were like quarters. "What? Really? I got in?"

"Yes. And classes start on the twenty-eighth. I expect you to be there."

She turned to the man. "Daddy, did you hear that? I got in! I got in!" The words came out in a squeal. She jumped up and down a few times.

By now, the assembled crowd had gotten to the board, and there were assorted whoops of joy and groans of disappointment. A couple of the parents gave "buck up" speeches, or said something like, "We'll try again next year," although Gio knew some of those kids would never be good enough. Perhaps that was a harsh way to think of it, but he'd been around music long enough to know that talent was not something that could be taught.

Pushing that aside, Gio extended his hand to the man. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Your daughter is an extraordinary talent."

The man blushed and took his hand in a firm handshake. "I'm Mike McPhee."

"Giovanni Boca, but I suppose you knew that."

"Emma is thrilled, obviously," Mike said. "We're really honored just to audition. It means a lot that you see so much in her." Gio detected a local accent—Brooklyn, maybe.

"It really was a splendid audition. Does this kind of musical talent run in the family? Do you sing?"

Mike shook his head. "No, not at all. Don't know where this voice came from. I don't know much about opera at all, either, but Emma loves it. Her voice teacher—do you know Tina Moretz from the Academy of Music?—well, Ms. Moretz thought Emma's voice would be good for opera, so that's what she's been studying for two years."

Mike's voice quivered a little, as if he were nervous. There was something about the man that softened Gio's heart. "I know Tina Moretz a little. She's a good teacher." Gio glanced at Mike's hands. No wedding ring. "Is there a singer in the family? A wife? A husband, even?"

Mike frowned and shook his head. He briefly looked very sad. There was a story there, for certain.

"Nah," Mike said, "just me and Emma." He put an arm around his daughter and hugged her close. He was not a small man—just above six feet, if Gio's guess was correct, and he was on the bulkier side, though up close it looked like the bulk was mostly muscle—so little Emma's head rested near his armpit.

The rhythmic clack of heels walking on the linoleum told Gio that Dacia was coming to fetch

him. "I have a faculty meeting in twenty minutes, or I'd chat more," Gio said to the McPhees. "It was wonderful to meet you, though, and I will see you in class."

"Yes, definitely!" Emma said.

MIKE had been at this dad thing for fourteen years, and the one thing he'd figured out for sure was that parenting involved a lot of multitasking. Thus, the night after the audition, he was watching the Yankees game while also ironing Emma's school uniform while also keeping an ear on her giddy phone conversations, because she apparently had to call half the planet to tell them she got into Giovanni Boca's workshop.

Mike did some quick calculating. Four more days of school; then she got a long weekend off before starting the opera workshop. Maybe they could do something special that weekend.

He was still a little surprised that Emma had gotten into the opera workshop. Ms. Moretz had assured him that Emma had what it took, but Mike had tempered his expectations, not wanting to give Emma's hopes up too high and risk disappointment. Turned out his fretting had been for nothing, thank goodness.

And that Giovanni Boca was a trip, wasn't he? Really good-looking guy in a sleek Italian waistcoat with silver-flecked black hair and a bit of a barrel chest. Mike reasoned he'd have to have a chest like that to produce the sounds he had. Emma had shown him a few online videos, and Boca had been even broader back when he sang, a good thirty pounds heavier than he looked now. The audio quality of those videos hadn't been great, but the sound was still incredible, a voice unlike any Mike had heard before.

Emma had said Boca had lost his voice a few years ago. He had some kind of throat problem and they'd done surgery. Now he couldn't sing anymore and his voice certainly had a raspy quality Mike hadn't expected (though he'd had the slight Italian accent Mike *had* expected). Mike supposed that was why he was teaching.

Emma burst out of her bedroom. "Daddy? Are you working Monday?"

"Yep. Finishing up that Upper West Side job."

"Can Isobel come over after school?"

"Sure, sweetie. You're not going to have any school work this late in the year, are you?"

"No." She rolled her eyes and lifted her phone to her ear. "Izzy? Dad says it's okay." She walked back into her room and started talking rapidly with her best friend.

Emma was a good kid. She hadn't turned out the way Mike had thought she would. At first, he'd tried teaching her about his interests. He took her to baseball games and gave her lots of puzzles and blocks to play with. He wanted to encourage her to be athletic, but she'd always been small for her age and the bigger kids pushed her around. But then one day she'd started singing. So he revised his plan and decided he wanted her to be herself above everything. When she'd wanted to quit sports and take voice lessons instead, he'd agreed. The singing took him out of his comfort zone, into a world he didn't know anything about, but he was willing to go there for Emma.

It had been tough to know what to do in those days. The single-dad thing was not what he'd signed on for. He'd been all of twenty-three years old when he'd let Evan talk him into adopting a baby. He'd always wanted a big family, so it hadn't taken much work on Evan's part, granted, plus they'd thought they'd have to wait years before an agency found them a child. Then this pregnant

teenaged girl had picked Mike and Evan within weeks of their completing the paperwork.

But four years after that, Evan was dead and Mike was trying to figure out how to raise his sweet, beautiful, high-energy daughter on his own. His relationship with his own parents was dicey and none of his siblings had had kids at the time, so most of the time, he had to forego advice and just do what seemed right, what his instinct told him to do.

He was pretty sure he got it wrong a lot of the time, and yet Emma was becoming a smart, well-behaved teenager. He would have to beat the boys off with sticks once she started high school in the fall, but that was a mountain he'd climb when he got to it. In the meantime, she seemed happy to practice her singing and hang out with her girlfriends, and most of the time she did well in school. And now she'd been accepted to the best opera workshop for teenagers in the city. So he must have done something right.

She came back out of her bedroom, off the phone now, and threw herself on the sofa with a huff. "Who's winning?" she asked.

"Yanks are up two, bottom of the fifth."

She yawned and settled into the cushions. "What did you think of Giovanni Boca?"

"I think you've got your work cut out for you, kiddo. Ms. Moretz said he's a hard-ass of a teacher."

"He's the best, though. One of his students from a couple of years ago is in a Met production this season. She's one of the youngest actresses to get a starring role."

"Wow."

"I know. That could be me, Dad."

"It could be, yeah. Or you could finish school."

"Well, yeah, duh. I'm going to get into Juilliard."

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "You haven't even started high school. How can you be so sure?"

"I'm sure. Giovanni Boca's workshop is my ticket."

He chuckled, admiring her confidence. He'd wondered sometimes if he thought so much of her talent because he was her father, if having raised her had biased him. But now that others saw the magic in her too, he knew he hadn't been mistaken. She could very well go to Juilliard and sing at the Met and tour Europe and all of those things.

"Plus, he's kind of cute, don't you think?" she asked, her expression a little dreamy.

Mike burst into laughter. "Yeah, sweetheart, I guess he is."

TWO

GIO talked while he plugged his MP3 player into the speakers. “I had a voice coach when I was living in Milan who thought the best way to inspire his singers was to scare the living hell out of them. So now I will do that to you.”

Twelve teenagers sat rapt on the studio floor, staring at Gio. He found “Der Hölle Rache” in the list of songs. “This is June Anderson singing from *Die Zauberflöte*.” He hit play. “It is famous, referred to as the Queen of the Night’s aria, although she sings another earlier in the opera that is nearly as good. Here, she is singing, ‘Hell’s vengeance boils my heart.’ She is not having such a good time, eh? And Mozart is about to put her through hell vocally too. Listen.”

It was clear from their expressions that a few of the girls knew this aria. Emma McPhee certainly did. The girls who didn’t blanched when the singer got to the run pattern between the verses.

“This,” Gio said when the aria finished, “is coloratura. Literally, it means coloring, but in the context of an opera, it means to add these vocal flourishes. They are beautiful but extraordinarily difficult to sing.” He smiled, trying not to freak the kids out too much. “That is, coloratura was often added to songs in the bel canto tradition. Can any of you think of other examples?”

About half the class was with it. Emma cited Rossini, the obvious example. Marie pulled out an obscure Mozart piece, which allowed Gio to freak the class out more by pointing out that that particular part was written for a castrato. Most of the boys winced at that. Greg knew “Every Valley Shall Be Exalted” from Handel’s *Messiah* was a coloratura tenor aria.

“Good,” Gio said. “Now I will blow your minds some more. This one is from *Nixon in China*.”

After playing a few more arias, he had the class stand and he ran through some vocal exercises, mostly scales and weird syllables and matching pitch to the piano. It was a good crop of students, no doubt about that. Still, he said, “The expectation is not for you to sing like June Anderson when you finish my class, particularly since you are all teenagers and your voices are still developing. But I want you to think about what you might do in the future, what you’re capable of. Maybe one of you will play the Queen of the Night at La Scala someday.”

He gave them homework, asking them to find their favorite aria in their own voice range, something they could aspire to. Then he warned them, “This session was easy. After today, I will push you through your paces. I will challenge you to sing things you never thought you could sing, and I will teach you technique and style and grace. We will read music and we will learn languages. It will not be as easy as this. Fair warning.” He put his hands on his hips and aimed a stern look at them. “All right. Class dismissed.”

The kids gathered up their things. A few of the parents filtered into the studio, including Mike McPhee, who grinned when he saw his daughter. The fanatical stage parents often picked up their kids, but it seemed weird for someone like Mike—today in beat-up jeans and a paint-splattered T-shirt—

pick up his daughter when she could just as easily get home by herself on the subway, like most of the kids in this city. Gio found Mike's overprotective instinct a little curious.

So he approached. "Mr. McPhee. Nice to see you again."

Mike smiled. "Yes." He turned to his daughter. "How was class?"

"Good," said Emma. "I'll tell you about it on the way home."

"Not all of the parents pick up their kids," Gio said, trying tactfully to ask why Mike was there.

"I was working in the neighborhood. Figured I'd drop by so she didn't have to take the bus alone."

Gio couldn't decide if the bright smile and the ratty clothes made him more or less attractive. After a split second, when Mike smiled again, Gio decided they added to Mike's appeal. "What do you do?" he asked, gesturing at the paint splatters.

"Independent contractor. I'm remodeling a kitchen a few blocks from here. Well, not just me. I've got a team of guys who work for me. But, yeah, that's what I'm working on right now."

"Oh, okay," Gio said, not sure how to respond. "I know very little about that sort of thing. Is it going well?"

"It is. We should finish ahead of schedule." He smiled again, and *Dio*, but this man had a beautiful smile. "I don't know much about opera except what Emma tells me, so I guess you and I don't have a lot in common."

"Oh, I left my water bottle by the drinking fountain," Emma said. Then she dashed off.

That left Gio alone in the studio with Mike.

It was strange. Mike was not Gio's type at all. All of Gio's exes were dancers or artists or people who worked in the theater in some capacity, and yet here was this blue-collar guy who drew Gio's attention like no one he'd seen in a long time.

It was wiser to keep one's distance, Gio reasoned. Mike was handsome, but he was also the father of one of Gio's students, something that seemed ethically problematic. Furthermore, Gio had no idea if his advances would be welcome or if that would be the sure way to destroy Mike's jovial demeanor. Trying to keep the conversation going, he said, "For someone who doesn't know much about opera, you are raising quite the young singer."

"Thank you. She loves it. And she has a mind like a sponge, so she learned all about it on her own. I never wanted to force her into something she wasn't interested in, you know? My parents were always trying to make me fit in this little box, and I hated that."

"Whereas my mother sang opera at La Scala and I followed right behind her."

Mike laughed. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't say something offensive."

"It's quite all right." Gio smiled. The truth was that he liked listening to Mike's voice. Mike probably could be trained to sing baritone, and his voice had a rich quality to it, although the Brooklyn accent kept him from sounding like he belonged in Gio's world.

Emma appeared in the door of the studio. "I'm ready to go, Daddy," she said.

"Okay, kiddo. We'll see you next time, Mr. Boca."

There weren't any other students around, so Gio leaned forward and said softly, "Please, call me Gio."

"Gio?" Mike raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps not in front of the other students.”

Mike glanced toward his daughter again. “I should go. Till next time!”

Gio watched him go, ruminating on how silly it was to develop a crush on the parent of one of his students. Except it wasn't just silly, it was dangerous.

THE thing of it was, Mike was really attracted to Gio.

It was a little strange to feel so strongly attracted to someone after a long time without dating much. Not that Mike didn't appreciate a hot guy, just that he hadn't really been looking, not after his last few relationships had fallen apart. In some ways, dating was easier now than it had been in the first years after Evan's passing, but in some ways it was harder. He didn't feel the same shame or guilt he used to, but it was hard to negotiate being a dad with dating. It wasn't just time spent away from Emma; it was that every man he'd met was perplexed—or horrified, sometimes—by the fact that he had a daughter, and that tended to scare them off.

He sat beside Emma on the crosstown bus. She sounded even more taken with the great Giovanni Bocca than Mike was. “So he played us this famous aria,” she said, “and it's really tough. Like, only a handful of sopranos in the whole world can sing it. And I thought, ‘That will be mine someday.’ I want to sing that aria when I play the Queen of the Night on one of the world's great stages. I think Mr. Bocca can help me get there.”

“So it's going well?” Mike asked with a smile.

She grinned back. “Yeah, so far. Although, he implied that the *real* work will start in our new class.” She leaned her head on his shoulder. “What's for dinner tonight?”

“Not sure. Sandy wants to come over to watch the game. I told him he could only come if he brings dinner.”

“So, pizza, probably.”

“Is that all right?”

She yawned. “That's fine, Daddy.”

She had grown up so fast. It felt like just yesterday she'd been his little girl and he'd been crying over her starting kindergarten. She was a young woman now, starting high school in the fall. She squeezed his heart every time she called him “Daddy,” because he knew the days of her doing that were numbered. He was enormously proud of her too, amazed by the person she had become.

When they got home, he put her to work on her chores, which got him a bit of whining in return, but she did them. He changed out of his work clothes, showered, and settled on the couch to watch the night's Yankees game. He picked up the remote and thought of Gio and how weird it would be to have the man sitting here with him, watching the game. Then again, Mike did occasionally put on a suit and go with Emma to the opera, so he supposed anything was possible.

Sandy showed up a short time later with a grin on his face and a pizza box in his hands. Mike let him in, and Emma, probably having been alerted to Sandy's arrival by the squeak of the door, zoomed into the room and threw her arms around him.

Sandy's real name was Alexander, but he'd been given the nickname years before because of his sunny good looks, and it had never occurred to Mike to call him anything else. They'd been best friends, brothers, since high school in south Brooklyn, seeing each other through the army, through

Evan's death, and through Sandy's romantic ups and downs.

Sandy danced free of Emma and slid the pizza box onto the coffee table. "So," he said, "Yankees."

Emma sat on the couch while Mike grabbed plates and cups from the kitchen. She rattled off some trivia about the game, and Mike couldn't help but smile. That sponge brain of hers had absorbed every bit of sports knowledge he had ever imparted, and even though opera was her greatest obsession at the moment, she could talk to Sandy about baseball just as easily as she could talk to Mr. Bo about Puccini.

During the third inning, Sandy said, "So. I'm dating a doctor."

Emma perked up at the potential for gossip. "Is he cute?"

"Yes, very. Here's the issue. He's an ER doc at Roosevelt Hospital and apparently he's on call all the time. So although I like him, I'm not sure if we should really date. He doesn't have time for me."

Mike nodded. "You do need a lot of attention."

Sandy tossed a throw pillow at Mike's head. Mike caught it deftly.

Sandy sat back on the couch and sighed. "I don't know if I can be a doctor's wife. All those crazy hours. And isn't working in the ER kind of dangerous?"

"Probably not in that neighborhood," Mike said.

"Hmm." Sandy seemed to consider that. "Yeah, I guess it's not like being a cop."

A wave of panic went through Mike, cold sweat breaking out everywhere.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," Sandy said. "I wasn't even thinking."

"It's all right," Mike sighed. "It's been more than ten years. You'd think those memories wouldn't hit me that way anymore."

"But sometimes they do," Sandy said softly.

"Yeah." He was aware of Emma staring at him, but he couldn't bring himself to look back. He had to fight not to retreat into himself, to dwell in some of the darker spaces within. He took a deep breath.

"Anyway," Sandy said. "Being a doctor also requires all that school. You know I ain't never been much for book learnin'. One of these days, he's going to figure out I'm not that smart."

"Don't need school to be smart," Mike said. It was a refrain, something he and Sandy had told each other plenty of times. Mike hadn't been college material, and he was all right with that because he'd made a good life for himself and Emma. He turned to Emma. "You're going to college, though?"

She laughed. "Juilliard."

"Right. Just so we're clear."

That she didn't remember Evan was sometimes troublesome to Mike. She'd still been in diapers when Evan had died, leaving Mike a single parent to a precocious little girl. He still thought of her as their daughter, his and Evan's, even though Evan had missed nearly all of her life.

He still got angry sometimes. Those moments were becoming few and far between, but as they watched the game and Sandy prattled on about his doctor, Mike felt that wave of anger at Evan for abandoning them, for putting himself in a position that would cause harm. He knew that was irrational, that nothing Evan could have done would have made that night any less horrible, that Evan

was a hero, in fact, because he'd stepped between a bullet and a kid, but, God, sometimes, sometimes he resented the hell out of Evan for leaving him alone.

"How're your singing lessons going?" Sandy asked during the sixth inning.

"First of all, it's Giovanni Boca's opera workshop, not just singing lessons," Emma said.

Sandy held up his hands. "Oh. Well, excuse me."

"It's going well. We've only had the one class so far, but I like Mr. Boca. He says our future classes are going to be much tougher, but I like the challenge." She grinned.

"Who is this Boca guy?"

"He's a famous opera singer," Emma said. "A tenor. He's sung all over the world. Now he teaches at the Olcott School."

Sandy nodded. "All right. So. On a scale of homely to dreamy, where does he fall?"

Mike put a hand over his mouth to hide his reaction, which was somewhere between horror and amusement. He didn't want to explain his attraction to the man to Sandy.

Emma raised her eyebrows. "That hardly seems like a fair question."

"Turnabout is fair play," Sandy said.

"He's pretty cute. Daddy, you agree, right? You talked to him for a while after class today."

Sandy smirked. "Oh, really?"

Mike felt the heat come to his face. "About Emma. We talked about Emma. And then I embarrassed myself because he asked me to call him 'Gio' and I didn't know how to respond, so I just... left."

Emma turned to him abruptly. "He asked you to call him Gio?"

"Yeah, I just figured—"

"Daddy, he likes you!"

Mike guffawed. "Honey, that's crazy. What reason on God's green earth could a world-famous opera singer have to be interested in a guy like me? Also, why am I having this conversation with you?"

"A couple of other teachers stopped by the workshop today. Everyone called him Mr. Boca. They seemed kind of afraid of him, actually. But he asked you to call him Gio."

"He was probably buttering me up," Mike said. "Oh, hey, look who's at bat!"

The game went into extra innings, and Mike ordered Emma to bed when it was over. Sandy helped him clean up. Mike was showing him out the door when Sandy suddenly turned around and said, "I still miss him sometimes too."

There was that wave of panic again, making Mike feel a little nauseous. "I know."

"It's been so long that I almost forget sometimes. I really am sorry for what I said."

"I know. I almost forget sometimes too. Don't worry about it."

"He'd be really proud of Emma. And you. You've done great things with her."

Mike forced a smile through the sadness that threatened to weigh him down. "Thanks. I think he'd be proud of her too."

They hugged and Sandy left.

Mike lay awake in bed for a long time that night. This was nothing like the profound loneliness

he'd felt just after Evan's death, when Evan's clothes were still in the closet and his scent still on the sheets. ~~This was a whole new apartment, in fact, in a different neighborhood, with different furniture, different linens, different scents.~~ Evan's death didn't weigh on Mike like it used to. He missed Evan sometimes deeply, but he'd moved on with his life. He'd raised a great daughter without Evan, built a thriving business without Evan, carved out a life for himself without Evan. Evan was now nothing more than a memory.

Mike's thoughts drifted to Gio as he finally started to fall asleep. Gio, who was alive and not eleven years dead. Gio, who was handsome and interesting and completely unlike any man Mike had ever been with. Gio, who was Emma's teacher. Gio, who was worldly and rich and not building kitchen cabinets to pay the bills.

A fantasy, in other words. But if thinking about that fantasy got Mike to sleep at night, then he was willing to embrace it.

THREE

EVERYONE at the Olcott School knew Tracy Quinlan.

The Quinlan family was widely known to be extremely generous when it came to supporting the arts in New York City. Tracy had once been a ballerina with the City Ballet. This was apparently before she caught the eye of her husband Eric and together they saw to populating all of the music and dance classes in the city with their offspring. Well, Gio acknowledged as he watched Tracy Quinlan pace in the music department's common room, that might have been a slight exaggeration, but she did have five children, including the unfortunately hawk-nosed Amelia, who was now enrolled in her summer opera workshop.

Gio hated dealing with the stage parents. He'd been dealing with people like Tracy Quinlan for most of his life, but he'd never appreciated how nefarious the overzealous parents were until he started teaching.

He took a deep breath as he walked into the common room. "Mrs. Quinlan," he said.

"Ah, Mr. Boca. A word, if you please."

"Sì. Come to my office."

She was expensively dressed and her heels were impossibly high, though she still walked like a ballerina as he escorted her across the common room.

"So pleasant to see you again," Gio said as he settled into his office chair. He thought he sounded rather like he meant it. He'd taught Amelia's older brother Tony during his first workshop. Tony had a decent voice but had hated opera. Gio had heard he was studying engineering in college now.

After she sat at the edge of his guest chair, she said, "I'm delighted that Amelia is thriving in your workshop."

Gio nodded, although "thriving" seemed like a strong descriptor given that she was one of the weaker singers in the class. She was still better than 95 percent of the teenage singers in the city, probably because her parents had forced talent on her by putting her in voice lessons since she'd been a toddler, but certainly in a different league from the top singers in his class.

"I saw the auditions," Tracy Quinlan went on. "Quite a lot of talent in your workshop this summer."

"I agree. One of the better groups I've ever assembled. I'm having a great deal of fun teaching them. Some of the singers need some refinement, but the raw talent is remarkable."

"I've been considering making a substantial donation to the program this year. Ms. Russini told me that donations fund most of the workshop's expenses."

"Part of them, anyway," said Gio. "I do appreciate your generosity, Mrs. Quinlan. You and your

husband are both clearly devoted to the arts.”

“My youngest daughter Jennifer has been taking lessons too. She wants to sing opera just like her sister.”

“That’s wonderful.” Gio wondered what Tracy was getting at.

Tracy crossed her legs primly. “Amelia’s success is very important to us. I wanted to impress that on you.”

“Indeed. I imagine many parents feel that way about their children.”

She tilted her head. “You do not have children of your own, Mr. Boca.”

“I do not.”

“Perhaps, then, you are not so familiar with the lengths some parents will go to make sure the children get everything they deserve.”

Gio didn’t like the sound of that. “Ah. I’m not sure I follow.”

“Amelia wants to get into the Olcott School Young Musicians Program this fall. She auditioned last year but didn’t make it. I hope that with your influence, she will not confront the same fate this year. She really was terribly disappointed, as were my husband and I.”

There it was. Part of Gio wanted to ask to what lengths Tracy Quinlan was willing to go, but he didn’t dare. He had no doubt this was a woman who was used to getting what she wanted, or at least was used to throwing money at people until what she wanted came to pass.

Gio was not especially moved.

“My colleague Ms. Russini is the chair of the audition committee for the Young Musicians Program. I don’t have much of a say in who gets in.” Dacia had been leaning on him to volunteer for the committee, but he didn’t especially want to, so he’d been kicking that decision down the road.

Not that it mattered, because Tracy Quinlan plowed forward. “You are Giovanni Boca, and you told the faculty you thought a student was good enough, that student would get into the program.”

That was probably true. Gio sighed. “*If* a student does exceptionally well in the workshop, I will recommend her for the Young Musicians Program. But she can’t rest on her laurels. She should practice as much as possible and come prepared to my class. She cannot rely on her talent alone because she’s competing with the best young singers in the region for those spots, some of whom live and breathe opera.” He took a deep breath so as not to come off as combative, even though this whole conversation irritated him. “I appreciate your coming to talk with me and I will do what I can to help Amelia, but she has to do her end of the work as well.” He glanced at his watch. “Speaking of the workshop, it is beginning shortly. I don’t mean to cut you off, but I have to track down my assistant for the music for today’s class.” He stood.

Tracy mirrored his movement, rising slowly to her feet. “Thank you for meeting with me. And I can assist you in any way....” She smiled.

He understood what she was doing. That smile might as well have been a twenty-dollar bill pressed into his palm. “I’m sure we’ll be in touch, Mrs. Quinlan.”

She shook his hand and then slid out of his office.

DACIA came to that afternoon’s workshop—the fourth class of twelve, as they met twice a week for

six weeks—to work with the female singers. She still had an amazing voice, though she preferred teaching to performing. Gio liked working with her. They came from the same place, for one thing she grew up not far from his childhood home near Florence, and they'd met while performing together in Italy before Gio had made a name for himself. Dacia had also been instrumental in getting him the job. She'd been on the faculty at Olcott for a few years before he'd lost his voice. She had stuck with him from when he was on top of the world until he hit rock bottom, and she'd helped pull him out with the offer of another way to use his skills. He appreciated that and loved her for it. Plus, she sang like a dream.

Dacia's rich mezzo-soprano voice filled the studio as she sang the opening bars of "Habanera" from *Carmen*. He handed out music and had the kids sing some of the chorus parts from the opera. There were mixed results, although most of it wasn't good. They were butchering the French pronunciation, for one thing. One of the tenors was flat. Tiny Emma McPhee overpowered all of them.

"All right," he said when Dacia finished. "This is an important lesson. I know you aspire to greater things than the chorus, but it showed me what's going on with you all in general. A lot of you, if you're serious about singing, will get your start in the chorus and work your way up to being prima donna. That means balancing your voice with those of the other singers. That also means pronouncing the words right even if you don't know what they mean. So, let's try this."

He handed out new sheet music, a movement from a Bach oratorio, and then he had Dacia write a basic Latin pronunciation guide on the white board he'd wheeled in earlier. The rest of the class was intense and the kids clearly struggled, even Emma.

Then he broke the kids into groups and had Dacia take the girls while he worked with the boys.

The class wound down and the kids gathered up their stuff. He walked over to Dacia. "Thank you for your help today."

"My pleasure. This is a great crop of students you've got."

"I know. I made the right choices." Although he now had his doubts about Amelia Quinlan.

Dacia laughed. "Don't let them hear you say that." Then she smirked. "Did you know there is a handsome gentleman standing in the doorway?"

Gio tried not to jerk as he turned his head. Mike was there and shooting Gio an odd look.

"That's Emma McPhee's father."

"I see."

Gio wondered what Dacia saw. They stopped talking as they watched father and daughter greet each other. Both smiled and Mike asked Emma something Gio couldn't hear from across the room.

"È bello," Dacia commented.

He was quite beautiful. "Sì. Lo so."

"È sposato?"

Gio was curious about his history, but at least they'd established that he wasn't married. "No."

"Gay?"

"Non lo so. Forse." Maybe he was. Gio couldn't really tell. It seemed unlikely that a girl would have a single gay father, but this was New York and stranger things had happened.

And now Mike was coming right for them.

"Hello, Gio," Mike said with a smile.

“Ciao, Mike.” Gio smiled back and took a moment to appreciate being in Mike’s presence again. Then Dacia cleared her throat. “Sì.” He threw a frustrated glance at her before looking back at Mike. “This is my friend and colleague, Dacia Russini.”

Mike held out his hand. Dacia shook it and smiled at him.

“Buongiorno,” Dacia said. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” said Mike. “I just wanted to say hi. Emma is trying to make plans with a few of the other girls and doesn’t need me hovering.”

Dacia reached over and patted Gio’s shoulder. “I must be leaving. I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow, Gio.”

“Molto bene. Ciao,” he said.

Mike rocked on his heels as Dacia walked away.

“Girlfriend?” Mike asked.

That struck Gio as so ridiculous that he laughed. “Oh, no. Very old friend. We performed together many times, but any romance between us was kept on the stage. She’s married to a choreographer.”

“Oh.”

“And she’s, ah, not my type.” He raised an eyebrow.

Mike’s eyes widened. It occurred to Gio to worry that a blue-collar guy like Mike might be homophobic, but he just nodded and said, “Good to know.”

Gio second-guessed himself in a way he usually didn’t. He was used to going after and getting what he wanted, and he wanted Mike, but he held himself back. He got kind of a gay vibe off Mike but wasn’t certain, for one thing. He thought fraternizing with the father of one of his students was probably unethical, and that it could be a thorny situation. But he had to know more about this man. Part of it was curiosity about Emma, yes, and wondering where that amazing talent came from. But part of it was just this beautiful man who seemed so unlike anyone else in Gio’s life.

He said, “I don’t suppose you would be interested in having lunch with me some day this week. You work in the area, right?”

“For now, yes. Lunch?” Mike’s eyes went wide again, which made Gio think his instincts might have been wrong. He thought he’d sensed some mutual interest, but maybe his gut feeling was not quite accurate.

“To discuss Emma,” Gio said. “She has the potential to do some really amazing things. I thought I might talk that over with you.”

Mike’s relief was a palpable thing. Gio couldn’t tell if that was a good or bad sign. “Oh. Yes, of course. Just tell me where or when. I usually take lunch around one.”

“There’s a little cafe on Sixty-third.” Gio gave Mike directions. “Tomorrow?”

Mike nodded slowly. “Tomorrow is good.”

Emma poked her head into the studio. “Dad? I need to run by the music store on the way home. Are you ready?”

Mike smirked at Gio. “I never know who is in charge here anymore. I guess I’d better go.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mike.”

“Yes. Definitely.”

FOUR

MIKE suspected an ulterior motive but wasn't disappointed to find Gio already seated when he got to the restaurant. He'd even taken the time to change clothes so he wouldn't be sitting down to a nice lunch in his old jeans and ratty T-shirt. So, wearing one of his nicer shirts and a crisply clean pair of jeans, he sat across from the man and smiled.

Gio smiled. "I'm glad you could make it. How are you?"

His voice had a rhythmic cadence to it, even with the rasp. Something about the Italian accent and that rough quality to Gio's speech was incredibly sexy.

"I'm good," Mike managed to say. He was distracted by how good Gio looked. He was wearing a dark-green shirt that looked great against his olive skin and had a shadow of dark scruff against his jaw. He had really incredible eyes, Mike noticed for the first time; they looked almost green in the dim lighting of the cafe. To keep from staring, Mike knew he had to say something. "How are you? I assume the workshop is going well, since that's all Emma has been talking about for the past week. Do you teach other classes too?"

"College voice classes at the Olcott School during the regular school year. I also teach a seminar on the history of opera in the spring. Every now and then I teach a couple of Young Musicians Program students. That's the after-school program for high school students."

"Okay." Mike felt a bit at sea. "That's... that's good. So, um, you wanted to talk about Emma?"

Gio smiled. "Your daughter is extraordinarily talented."

"Thanks. I think so too."

Mike knew he was squirming. He had a hard time accepting compliments on Emma's behalf. He rubbed his hands on his thighs and tried to calm down. He had no reason to be nervous, even if he was sitting across from a devastatingly attractive man.

Emma. They were here to talk about Emma.

"And you don't really sing much," Gio said. "Sometimes it does skip generations, as they say, but it's unusual for a girl this disciplined to come from a family with no musical experience."

Mike felt like his skin itched everywhere. He shifted his weight on the chair. "Well, I used to sing her little nursery rhymes and things when she was a baby. We always had music playing at home. The opera, though... I have no idea where that comes from. When she first started showing an interest, I managed to get some tickets to the Met. We were way up in that top mezzanine, the one that's about three miles from the stage, but she was in love. I've never seen such amazement on her face." Mike laughed to himself, trying to calm down. "As for skipping generations, well, her parents could be the most musically gifted people on the planet, but I wouldn't know. She was adopted."

"Oh." Gio tilted his head as if this confused him. "Interesting. I never would have expected."

“I get that a lot. But any resemblance is coincidental.”

“I suppose genetics don’t matter as much as care and love and those things.”

Mike felt like he was being patronized a little. Mildly annoyed, he looked over the menu. “Do you invite me here just to praise Emma or my parenting?”

“Not exactly, and before you ask, no, I don’t do this with all the parents.” Gio shook his head and stared, unfocused, at something on the table. “I should be frank, then. I do think Emma is a rarity. I’ve been running this workshop for six years now and I’ve seen maybe three singers like her in all that time. Honestly, it would give me great joy to continue to work with her after this workshop is over.”

“Are you serious?” Mike wanted to laugh at the absurdity of a world-renowned singer wanting to work with his little girl. “Well, I’ll be frank too, and tell you that I had to scrape together the money for this class. I’m not sure I can afford—”

“We don’t have to decide right now. If the rest of the workshop goes well, maybe we can work something out.”

“I... okay.” It seemed so unlikely. People never handed things like this to Mike.

“But I didn’t just want to talk about Emma. That wasn’t the only reason I invited you here. I... ah... well.”

Gio laughed, although it seemed to lack humor. He rubbed the back of his head with his hand, which pushed some of his dark hair up into spikes briefly before it all fluttered back into place. Mike hadn’t really noticed before, but Gio had a hell of a head of hair, thick and a bit unruly, the sort of hair one could really run his fingers through. He flexed his fingers under the table as he thought about doing just that.

Luckily, Gio didn’t notice because he was too busy staring at the table. He laughed again. “*Mio Dio*, I do not think I have been this nervous since I was a teenager.”

“What are you nervous about?” It dawned on Mike suddenly that Gio was perhaps on edge for the same reasons Mike was. That also seemed absurd—how could a man like Gio possibly be interested in a man like Mike?—but maybe the situation wasn’t so strange if you stripped it down to its essence. Gio was worldly and knowledgeable and so very Italian. Mike had no more education than a high school diploma and came from a South Brooklyn lace-curtain Irish family, and the only reason he had ever been outside of the greater New York metropolitan area was because the army had sent him there. And yet hadn’t Gio been implying the day before that he was not interested in women when he said Dacia wasn’t his type? That meant Mike and Gio were just two men with some kind of attraction zinging between them, both nervous and a little awkward.

It made Mike laugh.

Gio let out a breath and looked up. “What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking, you know, here we are, two guys having a casual lunch. And yet we’re both as nervous as if we were on a first date.”

Gio let out a little burst of laughter. “I... yes. Honestly? I invited you to lunch because I thought that the handsome father of one of my students might be a man I’d like to get to know better. It’s probably somewhat unethical, but—now why are you laughing?”

Mike tried to school his features—the laughter was almost as much humor as nerves at that point—and he had to sip his water to stop. “Emma has been teasing me for days, claiming that because you asked me to call you by your first name, you must *like* me.”

“She may have been onto something,” Gio said, chuckling.

“Yeah?”

“Is that so surprising?”

“I guess not.” Mike found himself smiling. It was certainly a relief to know for sure that Gio was gay, at least. There was also something kind of new and interesting about this situation. Gio had been playing on his mind for days, and now it turned out the feeling was mutual. “Of course, in his little teenage mind, I’m sure she imagines us making eyes at each other and, like, passing notes in study hall.”

Gio smirked. “What would your note say?”

Mike considered. He felt giddy as he thought about what to say. “You’re hot. I like you.”

Gio laughed. “If only it were that simple, eh?”

“Maybe it is. We’re having lunch now, aren’t we?”

“That’s what I like about being an adult. There’s a lot less *stronzate*. I teach teenagers. I see the drama these kids drag themselves through.”

“Yeah. Emma and her best friend Isobel have been having a lot of very serious conversations about boys lately. I tell her she should ask for my advice. I know a few things about men, since I am one and I’ve been dating them for twenty years, but she says, ‘No, *Dad*, you don’t know what it’s like.’” Mike rolled his eyes.

Gio shook his head. “I can’t even imagine what it’s like to raise a girl.”

“She’s a great kid, but it’s not always easy.”

Gio got up a few minutes later and went up to the counter to order them sandwiches. Before he left, he asked Mike if they should have wine as well. “Rain check,” Mike said, because he had a sudden vision of an elegant evening sipping wine with this Italian gentleman and wanted to reserve that for the future. “I have to be back on the job after this.”

“I will hold you to that,” Gio said.

Mike hoped he would.

“Tell me your sob story,” said Gio once he sat back down with their sandwiches.

Mike had no idea what to say. “What do you mean?”

Gio smiled and looked right at Mike. “If you have a teenage daughter but a young face, imagine your age must be close to mine. Late thirties?”

“I’m thirty-seven.”

“Ah. As am I. In my experience, no one gets to be our age without a little tragedy and drama. So I’m asking, what’s yours? Also, sometimes you get this look on your face like you’re remembering something really sad.”

“I do?” Mike couldn’t imagine how Gio had seen that in him. It was there, certainly, but Mike didn’t like to show that side of himself, especially not to strangers.

“Here, I’ll tell you mine.” Gio smiled and folded his hands on the table. He leaned forward a little. “It went like this: I’d had a sore throat for a couple of days, but I kept singing anyway, because that was what you did. You drank tea with honey and the show went on. I was starring as Calaf in a production of *Turandot* in Beijing, and it was like every one of my dreams coming true.”

Gio sat back a little and slid his arms off the table.

“Nessun Dorma,” he said. “It is famous for a reason, you know. That aria, that was half the reason I began to sing opera at all. So there I was on stage, building up to the climax of the song. Calaf sings, *Vincerò!* It means ‘I will win.’ He sings it three times, and the third is this tremendous note of triumph. Calaf is confident he will win this ridiculous contest with Princess Turandot. So there I am on stage, singing the lead up to that note: *vincerò, vincerò.*” He said the words like a chant.

Mike’s heart ached at the realization that Gio rasped the words because he could no longer sing them.

“In the middle of the third *vincerò*,” Gio said, “my voice cracked and then died. ‘I will win,’ I was singing, but I lost.” He looked at the table. “There were polyps on my vocal chords I didn’t know about. What I thought was an oncoming cold turned out to be a bigger problem. It might have been fine, but my doctor called my profession ‘chronic overuse of the vocal folds,’ or something like that. They did surgery and discovered that, although the polyps were healing, they left behind scars. So now I can’t sing anymore.”

Gio’s story was delivered with the casual affect of someone discussing a trip to the beach, but the watery look in his eyes conveyed a much greater pain. Mike’s sympathy was like a fist around his heart, and the emotion that caught in his throat might as well have been a softball because he couldn’t form words or make sounds. For his part, Gio looked at the table, stared at his sandwich, and shook his head like he didn’t want to speak anymore.

Mike took a deep breath. “I know what that’s like,” he said. “To have the rug pulled out from under you. To have your whole life planned out for you until someone says you can’t have your plan anymore.”

“Tell me,” Gio said, looking up with a softness around his eyes that hadn’t been there before.

So Mike told his story. He explained about how he’d finished high school knowing he wasn’t college material. Not that he wasn’t smart—he knew he had some brains colliding around up there—but studying and tests were not where he would excel. He and Sandy had decided together to join the army. Shortly after they finished basic training, they were shipped off to Saudi Arabia. It was there they’d met another young private named Evan. Mike and Sandy and Evan became a trio almost immediately, the greatest of friends. In one of those odd twists of fate, Mike and Evan had been alone on a patrol together one night during a week in which half the platoon was down with the flu. During a lull, Evan turned to Mike, confessed his feelings, and kissed him. Mike had likewise been harboring a crush on Evan for weeks and was delighted. They were a couple from that day forward.

“We got caught,” Mike told Gio as he picked cheese off his sandwich, nervous now instead of hungry. “Before that, we’d been so goddamn discreet the CIA could have gotten tips from us, but one day we were fooling around in what we thought was an empty office and our commanding officer walked right in on us. The CO was a dick about it and invoked Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. And that was the end of my army career. After we were discharged, Evan and I wound up back here in New York.”

Evan had decided to make the most of his military training and went to the police academy. Law enforcement had felt like his calling. Then, a few years into his career in the NYPD and five years into Mike and Evan’s romantic relationship, they decided they wanted a whole mess of kids. They set the adoption process in motion.

“The counselor we worked with at the agency told us that because we were gay, it could be a few years, and that was what we expected,” Mike explained. He couldn’t look at Gio, who must have known by now what was coming. He couldn’t just cut to the chase, either. He needed Gio to know the

whole story, for some reason. "I was really young at the time. I wasn't ready to be a father, but Evan was really gung ho about it, and I thought, what the hell? Let's put our names in the hat. By the time we get a child, I'll be ready. Then this teenage girl in the Bronx saw our profile and decided her baby just had to go to a gay couple. It was crazy, but bless her, wherever she is. She gave us Emma, and I will never stop being grateful to her." Mike took another deep breath. "It was an open adoption. The birth mom was supposed to stay in touch, but she disappeared shortly after she turned eighteen. Just dropped right off the radar. Stopped returning my e-mails or phone calls. I hope she's all right."

"But this is your story, not hers."

Mike nodded. "It happened when Emma was three." He knew his voice had grown quiet. Gio leaned forward, probably to hear better. But Mike couldn't say the words any louder. "Evan was on a pretty routine shift when he and his partner got called to a disturbance at a bodega. At first he thought it was a robbery, but then he saw a man screaming at a young girl. The girl was in tears. Evan and his partner tried to talk the man down, but then the guy drew a gun." This was where things always got hard for Mike. He blinked to keep from showing too much on his face. "The guy was going to shoot the girl. Evan got between the girl and the bullet."

Gio put a hand to his mouth. "*Dio mio.*"

Mike sat back. "When the dust settled, I was a single dad raising a toddler in a city. So that's more of a sob story."

"I am so sorry, Mike."

"It's been eleven years. That kind of thing... it doesn't go away, exactly, and I still think about Evan pretty frequently, but it's not... it doesn't dominate my life the way it once did, I guess." What Mike didn't say, couldn't say, was that the only thing that got him out of bed in those days after Evan's death was Emma. If not for her, he would have had nothing to live for. He had to take care of a very young girl who had no idea what was happening, who kept asking why she couldn't see Dad. It was Evan anymore. He and Emma had been crucial to each other's survival.

After a long moment of silence, Mike said, "Look, my daughter is the most important thing in my life. I would do anything to make sure she's healthy and happy. I've never seen her as happy as she is when she's singing or talking about music. So maybe I'm a little uncouth and uncultured, but this is what she wants, so I'll see to it I do everything in my power to make this happen for her." He realized what he was saying as he was saying it. "Well, not *everything*. I hope you realize I didn't agree to lunch because—"

"No, I understand." Gio smiled.

"Good. Because I do like you, Gio. But that's separate from what I want for Emma." Mike looked at his watch. He had to get back to work and needed to get out of this room that was suddenly flooded with memories. He felt raw and vulnerable, a bad place to be with a man who was still a relative stranger. "I don't want to cut this short, but I've got a kitchen waiting for me."

"Yes, of course. I don't mean to keep you."

Mike smirked. "Well, maybe you do."

Gio laughed. "A little, yes."

Well, that was something. Mike supposed he wouldn't have torn his chest open and exposed his heart to just anyone, and there was something intriguing about Gio. If nothing else, they understood each other in a strange way.

There was a tussle when Mike tried to give Gio money for the lunch and Gio refused, but the

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