

Everlasting Essence

Ria Prestia

A Novel

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This book is dedicated to my husband and to my children who believed in me more than I

believed in myself, and who taught me that dreams need to be pursued regardless of your age.

. . . And to my father who told me a month before he died, “You’re smart, and you can do anything you set your mind to.”

Everlasting Essence

Prologue
The Present
April

It was dawn, and the sun was just rising as Gabriella Visconti-McHolland stepped out from the car door onto the paved road. She gently picked up the bouquet of flowers from the seat and calmly closed the door. It was the end of April, and the morning was still chilly as Gabby buttoned up her jacket to protect herself from the cold air. The wind gently blew through the trees, and as she looked up to the sky, she could see the tiny leaves move. *New life*, she thought. *Spring means new beginnings*. She stepped onto the moist grass and slowly walked up towards the grave.

As Gabriella approached the grave, she saw an old man place roses on a headstone. He looked up and smiled at her as she passed by him. She noticed he wasn't very tall, and his fair complexion emanated a luminous glow. His fedora hat sat tilted on his head to one side, and his body slouched slightly as his cane held him with support. She returned the gesture, and then placed her own flowers down. Kneeling onto the ground, she could feel the moisture from the grass as the wetness dampened her jeans. She didn't care. Kneeling made her feel more connected to the souls that rested beneath her.

She spoke out loud as she gazed at the headstones that stared back at her. "There are so many changes happening. I'm not sure what to do or what I want anymore. I know that change is part of life, but I don't like it. It makes me feel too uneasy, too unsure . . . but then, I guess if I had all the answers, I wouldn't be here. If I didn't have to learn something, I would be in heaven with you."

Standing up from the ground, she stared down at the headstone and began to speak again, "It's just your body in there. I know that. I know your spirit is with me, and you can hear me. I need your help and your strength. Some days, I feel overwhelmed with everyday life. I feel overwhelmed with responsibility. Some days, I want to run away where no one can find me, and yet, I can't, but I still fantasize about it. How do I commit to him completely with my heart? How do I know he really loves me and is not staying because of all that has happened? I do love him, but is that enough? How can I trust him? I can't decide what to do. I want to be in control of everything. If I can control, I know I won't get hurt. But I guess that's just a false belief." She stopped talking and glanced up at the sky again. Its deep Caribbean blue color captivated her. She looked around and noticed that every part of nature was waking up from the long winter sleep. The crocus and the forsythia were blooming in their beds. The flowers were vibrant and gave a palette of color that would warm the coldest of hearts. She could smell the aroma of the lilacs that bloomed behind her. The scent made her feel calm.

She turned and sat on the bench near the grave. She began to play with the locket that hung around her neck. She opened it and stared at the pictures. She smiled slightly and closed the locket. Suddenly, a hand lightly touched her shoulder. She turned and looked up to see the old man hand her a yellow rose. He smiled at her again and said, "Ciao, Bella" in an Italian accent. Slight tears formed in her eyes when she heard those words.

"May I join you?" he asked.

"Yes, you may," she said with quivering lips. He handed her a rose and sat down. She lifted the flower to her nose and smelled the essence of the fragrance. It was strong and wonderful.

"Thank you," she said.

"You are sad?" he said with a warm smile.

"Yes and no," she said with a feigned smile as she wiped her tears from her eyes. She looked at him and felt like she knew him, but she knew that she didn't. There was no fear in her; just peace.

“It’s peaceful to come here and sit and pray. Sometimes in the silence, you can hear an answer that you seek. Death and life are not easy. They each hurt us, mesmerize us, and lead us to unending questions. My wife is buried here, a few rows away. I visit her daily. She was my inspiration when she was alive . . . she still is my inspiration. I can see her in my dreams . . . I can smell her perfume in the air, and I can hear her voice in my heart. She knows when I need her, and she comes quickly.”

“Are you alone, or do you have children?” Gabriella asked as she listened attentively to his words.

“We had one child who died quickly after she was born. There were no others. The pregnancy was hard and left her unable to have any more children.”

“Oh . . . I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said as he looked down at the ground. Slowly, he lifted his head and looked at her. His eyes were soft and water was forming in them. He removed his glasses, and with his handkerchief, he gently wiped his eyes dry. He looked at Gabriella and smiled as he said, “It was hard at first, but we had each other, and we had nieces and nephews. In time, my business did well, so the two of us helped children who had no parents. Our foundation has helped many, and continues to do so. So by not having my own children, I had many from God. Do not be afraid to love,” he said as he touched Gabriella’s hand with his.

It startled her at first. Goose bumps ran up her arms when she heard the words. The energy in his touch was warm and strong. She felt inner peace and comfort from him instantly.

“All you ever need in order to love and to live here on earth has been planted in you by God. Let it start to open and grow.” With those words he stood up and smiled at her.

She stared into his blue eyes that were soft and soothing like a calm sea and quietly said, “Thank you.”

“Ciao, Bella,” he said again and walked away.

Gabriella sat there quietly for a while. His words resonated in her mind. *Ciao, Bella.* Then, she turned quickly to call after him and get his name, but he was already gone, his car in the distance. She sat there and let his words play over and over in her head. She knew that his words were a message. She looked back at the headstone and stood up. Walking up to the stone, she leaned over and kissed it. Tears swelled in her eyes again. She tried to control them, but she couldn’t. She held the yellow rose in her hand as she made a sign of the cross and blew a kiss. With a heavy heart, she turned to walk away knowing in her soul that there was an approaching crossroad in her life. It was inevitable; she knew that she must choose a new direction . . . but she wasn’t sure which road she should take.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PRESENT

MAY

It was just before dawn as Gabriella grasped the knob of the French door. Opening it slowly, she stepped quietly out onto the wooden deck. The chill of the morning dew that graced the wood made her stop. Reaching behind her, she picked up her slippers that sat by the door and put them on her feet. Clutching her coffee mug in her hands, she devoured the aroma of Columbian beans that were freshly brewed. The steam from the cup caressed her face with warmth as she took a sip. Standing there on the deck, she glanced out into the distance and saw the stillness of the harbor that fed into the Long Island Sound. A minuscule amount of lights, from the quaint town across the way, flickered giving her a realization that most of the world was still asleep, except for the fishermen whom you could hear in the distance. The trees swayed above, and the rustle of their branches was nature's alarm clock awakening the earth. In the early morning, before the sunrise, she could hear the commencing of boat engines as one by one the ships departed from the harbor, with fishermen, in search of their daily catch.

Slowly, Gabriella walked around the deck examining the world around her. The large deck swung around the back of the house and onto the side. There were two sets of stairs that led to their private beach below, and a dock in the distance was the path they took to get to their boat; an extravagant toy that gave them pleasure when they were able to use it and sail away from the everyday world. The deck chair was slightly damp, so she took a towel from the wooden basket and placed it on top of the chair before she sat down. Allowing her body to relax, she gazed out into the world around her. Leaning back into the chair and taking a deep breath, she inhaled the morning air letting the floral aroma fill her nostrils. The first flowers of the spring were blooming all over Long Island. The change of the season from the cold harshness of winter gave Gabriella hope; hope for a new start . . . for a new beginning.

Can we do it? Can we begin again? She thought. *How does a woman find herself again? How does she find that carefree young girl who had dreams? Well, through pain, suffering, and love; a lot of love.* She called them growing pains, but at times they felt like a fate worse than death. A better phrase would be soul growth. What a transformation; like a caterpillar to a butterfly. Except this took half of her life and almost an end to the things she loved the most. The sun began to creep up over the horizon grabbing Gabriella's attention. A small smile graced her lips. She was never a morning person, but she became one as life put more demands on her; especially demands that came from pint size individuals with loud lungs, dirty hands, and a definite determination to get what they wanted. *Amazing how children can make you change, even if you resist,* she thought.

Stretching and yawning, she watched as the mourning doves came to rest on the edge of the deck. Together, the doves sat on the ledge and cooed while watching the same view as Gabriella. *Doves mate for life,* she thought. She remembered hearing that somewhere, but she wasn't sure where. The ringing of the phone jarred her from her thoughts. Quickly, she picked up the receiver and smiled at the name on the caller ID. She clicked the button and spoke.

"Hey, Frankie," Gabby said quietly into the receiver.

"Hi, Gabs, how's it going?" The jovial voice of her friend Francesca Deluca whisked through the phone like a breath of fresh air.

"Pretty good, I guess."

"Are you glad you did it?" Frankie asked.

"I'm not sure. It really may be too late. He and I have been avoiding the problem."

Besides, I sort of feel bad about lying to the kids and sending them off to my sister's house in White Plains without them even knowing what Bryan and I are doing."

Playing with her coffee mug, Gabby took another sip. The mist off of the water gave an illusion of oneness between land and sea. Changing the subject she said, "This view today is amazing."

"Are you out on the deck watching the sunrise?" Frankie asked.

"You know me so well. Damn, we've definitely been friends too long, Frankie. What's it been, thirty-five years?"

"Since grade school, you and I have been sharing dark secrets."

"Many secrets, Frankie. It's a good thing you are technically my shrink; otherwise, I would have to kill you because you know too much," Gabriella said laughingly.

"By the way, how is Bryan?" Frankie asked.

"He's fine. I mean . . . he really is great. We've seriously been trying to reconnect, and to be honest with each other about what we want."

"Is the romance happening?"

"Yeah, the romance is there, but I think we're both a little unsure of how to woo each other again."

"Woo?"

"Yeah, Frankie, come on, you know what I mean. We're trying to captivate each other again like we did in the beginning. It isn't easy since there has been like twenty plus years and a lot of water under the bridge."

"Well, imagine if it was forty or fifty years," Frankie exclaimed.

"Well . . . then a tidal wave would be under the bridge," Gabby said with a laugh.

"Gabby, the true essence of your relationship is there . . . and it's more than kids, work, and a home; although, those are really important. But among all the bills, problems, and tears there is a real Gabby and Bryan. There's a Gabby in you that's not negative and indulging in a very overactive imagination. You know, Gabs, you had a sheltered upbringing, and you've been trying to run from it forever. You change what you want all the time! And to be honest, you want things instantly and without work."

"Okay, doc, I can accept the diagnosis, but the cure is a little bit harder."

"Well, that's because you attract negativity like a magnet. If doom and gloom is out there, they can find you with blinders on." The phone clicked and Frankie put Gabby on hold. While Gabby waited, she noticed that more lights were turned on across the bay, and more boats had launched from the docks. The horizon was now a palette of vibrant hues blending together as if touched with an artist's brush. The crimson red, along with a zest of orange and yellow, set the foreground while amethyst and sapphire hid in the background. The phone clicked back. It was Frankie again.

"Sorry about that."

"Was it another helpless soul like me?" Gabby asked.

"Sort of, but worse . . . it was my mother."

"Oh . . . sorry . . . well . . . I'm not that bad . . . thank God."

"You said it, Gabby . . . not me."

"So, old wise goddess who looms in all the sciences, what does the planetary alignment have in store for me for the next few days?"

"It'll be hot and heavy, with Venus transiting your fifth house."

Chuckling slightly, Gabby asked, "And, um, what does that mean?"

"The fifth house is fun and romance. It's a great time to be twenty and in love."

"Great . . . I'm not twenty."

“But you are in love.”

“Yeah, but sometimes love isn’t enough.”

“It can be.”

“Well, right now, I don’t believe that. There are some things from the past I’m having a hard time letting go of. I thought I could just let them go, but I can’t. Those things are making it hard for me to totally trust him.”

“So tell him that. Bring them up, and discuss them and let them play out.”

“I’m afraid to,” Gabby admitted.

“Like Pandora’s Box, once opened and unleashed you cannot put them back in, Gabby.”

“I know that, Frankie. I thought I could just let them go.”

“Only you can decide that.”

“Yeah, I know that, too. You know, Frankie, you’re my personal savior.”

“Wonderful, just don’t crucify me if it doesn’t work out. You have to remember, Gabby, that you can’t control everything in your life. You need to enjoy the here and now, and the only approval in life you need is your own, not your parents, or anyone else’s.”

“I know that, but I still get unsure of my own instincts. It’s hard to change old beliefs. I still get an unsure feeling, and to be honest, I want it to completely go away forever.”

“Well, it takes time and facing fears, but first you have to want a new start. You can’t carry the old false beliefs around with you because they’ll weigh you down so much that you can’t carry the new ones too. Gabby, your father was a powerful business man who wanted to control everyone and look at what happened. You learned from him that money meant power, and power meant control of your life. Gabby, your ego will always ruin you and your life if you let it.”

Gabby knew Frankie was right. It took so much pain for her to realize it.

Absent-mindedly, Gabby began to play with the gold locket that hung from a chain around her neck.

“Gabs, are you there?”

The question brought her back to reality.

“Frankie, is there a divine plan?” A noise from behind startled Gabby and made her turn from the receiver. The light in the kitchen was on, and she could hear the French doors open.”

Interrupting Frankie, she said quickly, “He’s up, I better go.”

“Okay, fine. Call me later and we’ll continue where we left off.”

“Okay, Frankie, I will.” She proceeded to hang up and quickly brought the phone to her ear. “Frankie, hey . . . about a plan, I . . .” she began to say, but she realized Frankie had already hung up.

A cool breeze off of the water gave a chill to Gabby’s bones. She knew Frankie was correct in all she said. With all those cultural superstitions like: bad luck, bad karma, an endless list of *what ifs*, as well as the old religious fear that God will strike you down for missing a mass, she felt predestined for failure. She really was amazed that she survived to her forties. Thank heaven for Frankie, her friend, personal shrink, and resident astrological star charter. She was a jack of all trades. Frankie was not the most conventional doctor. She believed that philosophy, religion, astrology, and science were actually all connected, and by separating them you kept people ignorant. She lived by the truth of what people should do based on their inner passion, and she hated the fears and guilt that had been instilled in people from generation to generation since the fall of Eden. It was Frankie’s goal and passion in life to help people find their calling, get on the right path, and create a wonderful journey for their lives.

She heard his footsteps behind her and as she was about to turn around, she felt his smooth, strong hands caress the back of her neck and shoulders. His touch made her melt as she felt his energy emanate from his body. He made her feel safe. The scent of his cologne took her back to the beginning and the innocence of not knowing each other.

“I’m glad we bought this house,” she whispered to him.

“So am I,” he said as his hands gently massaged her shoulders. He stood behind her and let his eyes penetrate the horizon that was in full bloom in front of him.”

“Bryan . . . I’ll really miss this place if we go, or if you go . . . I’ll miss you.”

He pulled at the chaise next to her and sat down on the edge of the chair. She sensed his silence before he spoke. “Gabby, I’ll miss this home and New York too. It’s my home and my past as well.”

She realized in his words that this just wasn’t about her. This was about him and their family as well. Gabriella Visconti-McHolland was not a woman alone in the world. She was a woman whose decisions in life affected many souls, not just her own.

“Can we really start over? I mean like it was when we just met?” she asked.

“Do you really want that? Gabby, these few days we’re spending together are not about fantasy . . . they’re about reality. You know that we need to make a final decision about us, our family, and what we each want. As much as I will miss this home, I want to leave New York. And this opportunity with the firm is perfect for me, and for us. That is, of course, if you want us to still exist, together? You need to decide what you really want?”

She sat there quiet and uttered not a word. She was stalling with her answer, and she knew he knew it too. She just did not know what she wanted. Noticing his leather jacket, she changed the subject and asked, “Where are you going?”

She noticed the distance in his eyes as he said, “I’m taking the Harley up to the deli to pick up some breakfast. What do you want?”

“A ham, egg and cheese sandwich would be nice.”

The hum of the engines from the boats grabbed her attention to the harbor. A butterfly flew between them and landed on the edge of Gabby’s chair. It sat there still. She noticed the first Monarch of the season. The beauty in its wings, and the grace it had to fly without fear made her realize how glorious that must feel.

Bryan got up and the butterfly fled. “Wait!” Gabby yelled.

He stopped and looked at her. “What?” he said unenthusiastically.

“How about today . . . What should we do?”

He smiled slightly. “I was thinking about taking the boat out since we haven’t done that in a long time,” he said.

“I’d like that. I really would,” she said sincerely.

She stood up and put her arms around him. They stood there and hugged each other. His warmth felt good. It felt right to her like an old pair of jeans that were always comfortable. She stared at him as he leaned in and kissed her lips. She felt the energy between them . . . it was still there. She got up from the lounge and grabbing his hand led him into the house. Not making it up the stairs to the bedroom, they fell onto the plush rug in the living room in front of the fireplace.

“You’re beautiful, Gabby.”

“I love you, Bryan, you know that . . . don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. But, Gabby, love isn’t enough. You’re afraid to trust, and I can’t change that for you; only you can change that.”

Placing her hands around his neck, she kissed him.

“This time together is not just about sex, Gabby. I don’t know if you’re saying hello or good bye. She could feel the touch of his hands on her body, and she began to fall under his spell.

“Does it matter right now?” she asked.

“No, it doesn’t,” he said.

They kissed and then walked into the house. They sat on the area rug by the fireplace and held each other. His arms felt nice around her body as they made love again like they had the night before.

Lying naked on the floor, Gabby leaned over the pillows and stared into the fireplace. The flames flickered quickly within the bosom of the hearth. The warmth of the heat graced her body as she reclined there deep in thought about herself and her life. *Keep the karma good. Live in the moment and stop reliving the past. Be positive and don’t doubt.* The words played over and over in her head as if Frankie was there talking to her. For years, actually decades, Frankie had told her to be positive, have faith, don’t doubt, but it was difficult for Gabriella to do. It was as if it was a force she couldn’t control. She had read every self-help book, searched her faith, read her astrological chart, and sought counseling with Frankie, and yet, she still couldn’t end the feeling of fear completely. She understood the feeling, befriended it, and tried to discard it when the friendship turned to hate, and still it lingered. It would come in the middle of the night, during an outing with the children, on holidays, while pleasure shopping, and so on . . . the list was endless.

It was a negative attitude created by fear and worry of the unknown. It was a constant vicious cycle that seemed to have no end. Once Gabby allowed the doubt into her thoughts, it would dominate her mind and lead to worry and fears that created a negative, bitter woman that wanted to control. By controlling, she thought the fears would not materialize. But Gabby learned what she feared the most was what she would actually create; a woman no one liked. She was trying to have faith, real faith. Not the faith tied up only on Sunday morning for one hour. She was trying to trust the unseen and to allow things to flow by making clear choices from her heart; by the acceptance of things that she could not control or change.

She knew the power of it all resided within her, and yet, she was still developing a trust in herself, and in her heart. Brushing her hands through her chestnut brown hair and getting up, she grabbed Bryan’s shirt from the sofa and put it on. Examining herself in front of the mirror that hung on the wall, she came to the conclusion that she looked good for her age. She tilted her face from side to side as she checked out a wrinkle under her left brown eye. She pinched her high cheek bones to give color to her complexion. Her olive skin was still smooth and her heart shaped face still gave an illusion of youth. However, within the reflection, she started to notice a hardness which was starting to form. The same hardness she witnessed in old woman whom were plagued with bitterness and regret. She didn’t want that, and she vowed to herself that she would not become that. She felt that her whole life was ahead of her; a life that still had dreams to it. She just was unsure if her need for independence would out way her desire for her marriage.

She turned to her side to examine the profile of her stomach and ass. She wasn’t tight or firm. Gabriella was never an athlete; she was an artist. She walked for exercise, and sometimes did yoga or Pilates to tone. She wasn’t ever faithful to a routine, and would at times bypass the old diet for an Italian pastry or Gelato when she wanted to.

She had full breasts, a small round belly, and defined hips that gave her an hourglass shape. She envied women with flat stomachs; something she could never achieve, even while doing crunches. Her mother told her many times that her Italian heritage led to the roundness of her belly and the fullness of her hips, and that these features would be handy for having babies. “Well Mama”, she said to the reflection in the mirror, “at least my legs have always been great.” For Gabriella, it was as if she needed to grow into her body. As a child, she believed other girls were prettier than her, and as a woman, she believed everyone else was sexier. Bryan was the one who let her see how beautiful she was. However, even with his love, it took her to reach her forties before she started to see it herself. Now, as she walked through the house staring at the pictures of her life and her family, she wished she had seen her beauty when she was younger.

She walked around the room examining every inch of it. The dark wood floors shined under the light from the sun that glared through the French doors. The baby grand piano sat gracefully in the corner waiting to be played. The room was meticulously decorated with pale yellow walls and sage colored sofas. A hint of Crimson red flowers stood in a vase on the table, and multi-colored pillows sat on the sofas. It was elegant, but comfortable. The living room and dining room were joined together, and the fireplace accented them both. Books adorned the shelves, and Impressionistic art hung tastefully on walls. As she walked into the kitchen, she let her fingers slide over the Cherry wood cabinets. She loved the kitchen. It was large and airy with a huge family room attached to it. A room where her kids laughed, played, and watched television. It was a room for everyone with plush sofas, and another fireplace against the wall that added warmth to the cold, New York winter nights. The room was warm and loving and led out to the deck that swung around the house. It was a home she loved beyond any other one she had. It was a home she didn't want to leave.

Walking towards the window, she looked at the view that awakened her every morning. She picked up a photo of her and Bryan that was nestled among other family photos, which sat on the ledge of the Bay window. Glancing at the picture, the memories of the past began to fill her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PAST

TWENTY-ONE YEARS EARLIER

It was a crisp, clear day in November as Gabriella Visconti was walking on the campus of *Hofstra University*. The fall was diminishing to winter, and it was apparent that the seasons were changing. The blue-grey hue in the sky told that winter would be descending on the earth soon. As she carried her books and marketing project, she stepped off the sidewalk . . . jumping back quickly, she screamed, “Hey, watch it!”

He stomped on the brakes and turned his head around. She watched him as he removed his helmet, got off the bike, and began to approach her.

“Are you a complete idiot or just a partial idiot?” she screamed, while picking up her papers.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you. Don’t you know to look before crossing the street? If you haven’t heard there are vehicles that drive on these roads,” he said.

She looked up at him and saw this unbelievable grin that made her heart stop, but she didn’t give in and remained angry. “Oh, you’re funny; of course, I looked . . . I’m not stupid. Maybe you should realize you’re not the only one on the planet!”

“Can I help you?” he asked as he knelt down to grab some of the books.

“I think I can do this by . . .” she paused in her words as she stood up and gazed into his eyes. His eyes were captivating. The blue-green color penetrated into her like an endless ocean in the Mediterranean.

Putting the rest of her papers together, she got up. “Myself. I can do it myself,” she said fiercely.

He handed the papers to her and smiled. She saw he was really handsome and his presence was apparent. He had dark hair, a strong build, the most unbelievable grin and eyes that made her melt.

“Is the work salvageable?” he asked nicely.

His question jarred her back to reality making her annoyed again.

“Hardly!” she said sarcastically. “I guess I’ll have to fix it over the weekend. You’re lucky it’s not due till Tuesday.”

She noticed the sexy grin he gave her, and it made her feel uncomfortable. “Do you know how to smile?” he asked her as she took some books from him.

“Of course I do when there’s something to smile about,” she said.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Gabriella,” she replied reluctantly.

“Well, Gabriella, can I buy you a cup of coffee to make up for this big mess?”

“I don’t think so. I think you’ve done enough.”

“Oh, come on, just a cup of coffee.”

“Really, I don’t want to,” she said as she started to walk away.

Bryan watched her walk away and realized that she was cute in a feisty sort of way, and he liked it.

He decided to pursue her. Quickly, he headed towards his bike and started it up. He drove down the road, and watched her turn her head around at the roar of the engine as he approached her.

He yelled as he drove slowly next to her, "Why not?"

"You know there are laws against harassment!" she yelled back.

"So, stop harassing me," he said.

"What!" she said as she began to walk faster. "I'm not doing the harassing . . . you are!" she yelled at him.

He stopped the bike. "I'm just trying to buy a pretty lady a cup of coffee. There's no law against that in this state."

She stopped walking and said, "You're very persistent, aren't you?"

"I like getting what I want," he said firmly.

"Well, sometimes in life, you don't always get what you want," she said as she took off in a rush. He quickly started the engine again to catch her. Suddenly, he heard the screech of a car brake and someone yell. He swerved out of the way of an approaching car, and in the chaos, he noticed that she had stopped quickly and turned around. He drove the bike over to her.

"Oh, my God, you are an idiot! You didn't look before pulling out?"

"You would care if I got hurt?" he asked.

"I care about hurt animals on the road, too," she smirked.

"Wow, a humanitarian as well as pretty."

He noticed her start to blush, and he knew he was getting to her. "You know, will a car have to hit me in order for you to have coffee with me?" he asked.

"Oh, my God, you're not going to stop are you?"

"Actually, no . . . I'm not. I said I get what I want."

He noticed the smirk on her face as she gave in. "Okay . . . you win. I'll have one cup of coffee."

"Great, hop on."

"Hop on? You're crazy. I just saw you drive, and trust me, there is no way in hell I'm getting on that bike with you now," she said adamantly.

"I'm really a safe driver."

"Yeah right . . . I'm sure," she said sarcastically. "But it'll be safer if I walk."

"You think so? I saw you walk, and you're pretty dangerous at that," he said while laughing.

He grinned at her, and his dimples came through. His eyes penetrated her face, and he noticed that she couldn't stop looking at him. He followed her for a while and enjoyed watching the way her hips swayed as she walked. Finally, he sped up and passed her. He headed to a spot and parked his bike. He looked in the side mirror and saw that she was staring at him. He grinned as she approached him. He could tell she liked him, but he could sense she was going to play hard to get.

Gabby looked at him as he disembarked from the bike. He was tall and built. His muscular arms fit nicely into the sleeves of his leather jacket. Black sunglasses covered his eyes, but the expression on his face was strong and showed a presence that was engulfing to her.

“So, do you like my Harley? Are you impressed?” he asked.

“No,” she said with a smile.

He grinned back at her.

“So what do you drive?” he asked as he placed his helmet on the seat. She was staring at his hands that were covered in black leather gloves that matched his black motorcycle jacket. As a matter of fact, everything he had on was black, except his blue jeans. He looked hot, and she wanted to run away.

“It’s cool.”

“Excuse me?” he said, “but what’s cool.”

“Your gloves, I mean the bike . . . they’re very cool.” She was getting mixed up, and she realized that she was blushing really badly.

“Yeah, I know,” he said, “everything about me is cool.”

“Oh, wow, you’re really sure of yourself aren’t you?” At first, she found his confidence to be arrogant, but in a strange way it displayed a great strength in him that she liked and was attracted to.

“So, are you going to answer my question?” he asked as they continued to walk to the coffee house.

“Oh!” she said, “A Camaro”.

“What color is it?”

“Red,” she said.

They continued with some small talk as they walked into the coffee house and headed for a table. Sitting down, she wondered what she was doing with him since she hardly knew him.

The coffee house was just off campus and was a perfect hang out. The place was comfortable with oversized chairs and plush sofas. They sold coffee, exotic teas, sodas, sandwiches, and snacks. Gabby noticed people sitting diligently with open books studying, and remembered her project that was ruined. A frown started to appear on her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I just remembered how we met, and I’m not looking forward to doing that project over.”

“I really am sorry. I guess it was just fate that brought us together.”

They exchanged the usual “getting to know you” questions. Gabriella found out his name was Bryan, Bryan McHolland, and he was twenty-one years old, sure of himself, and in pre-law. He liked to race cars at Islip Speedway, and ride motorcycles. He lived on Long Island in a town called Syosset. He had one older brother, one younger brother, a lot of friends, and the most captivating eyes Gabriella had ever seen. They were nice eyes . . . kind eyes that brought her deep into his soul. She felt good with him. She felt comfortable, and that confused her.

He found out she was Gabriella Visconti and that she lived on the South Shore of Long Island on the water. She had an older brother who was married with children, and an older sister who was married with children. Gabriella was the youngest of the family, whom was still home, living with her parents.

“So, you’re an advertising major?”

Fidgeting with the napkin in her lap, she looked up into his eyes. “Yes, I started out as an art major and then I switched to communications,” she said.

“Do you paint?” he asked.

“Yes, I paint, draw, and play the piano. I’ve been doing these things since I was

three.”

“So, you’re an artist. Why did you switch from an art degree?”

“I just figured it would be more exciting to be on the business side of life. I have a minor in business as well. My dad’s a business man, and he did very well for himself, so I decided it would probably be more lucrative than an art degree. I mean, how many rich artists do you find out there?”

“Well, an artist practices their art because they love it, not because of money.”

“Well, a struggling artist is not what I want to be,” she said adamantly.

They stopped talking as the food arrived. The waitress set down the plates, smiled, and walked away.

“This looks great. I love chicken salad,” she said.

“Well, this place has the best. Actually, all their food is great.”

“I really don’t come in here,” Gabby said as she took a bite of her sandwich.

“Why not? It’s a popular spot by the campus.”

“No particular reason. My dad is in the restaurant business, and when I leave here, I usually go over there and eat.”

“What restaurant does your dad own?”

“Visconti’s,” she said softly.

“Visconti’s! That’s more than a restaurant. Gabriella, that’s a huge catering hall,” he said shocked.

“Yes, I know,” she said quietly.

“Wow, well I guess this is pretty small compared to that.”

“So . . . they have great chicken salad, and the coffee is good.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t realize it when you said your last name that you were from that family.”

“She started to feel embarrassed. Her name, at times, did that to her. There were times she wished that the Visconti name wasn’t attached to her. “Most people actually don’t realize it when I say it,” she said.

“So, what is the Visconti family like?”

She started to get serious because she hated to talk about her family. “Well . . .” she continued, “Um . . . my dad is very Italian and very protective.” Looking at him, she continued to speak, “To be honest, I always do everything right. I mean, I always do what he says. He wouldn’t approve of me going on that motorcycle of yours.”

“That’s why you said no?”

She didn’t answer.

“So you like the motorcycle. Do you want to go for a ride?” he asked.

She still didn’t answer.

“You do, don’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know . . . sort of. I do find them exciting, but I’ve never been on one before.”

He looked at her. “Well, then, I guess you need to take a ride after we eat,” he said.

“Oh, I don’t think so. No. I can’t do that,” she said firmly.

“Come on, Gabby . . . can I call you that?” he asked.

“Yes, you can. I answer to both Gabby and Gabriella.”

“I won’t tell Daddy. I promise.”

“You’re funny. You know that? But if something happens, he’ll kill me and probably you too.”

“If something happens, you might be dead before he has a chance to.”

“Oh, wonderful, now, after that remark, you want me to trust you on a motorcycle.”

“I really am safe. I won’t let anything happen to you . . . trust me.”

She got quiet and started to play with her coffee cup. She was drawn to him, and she felt

safe with him. She couldn't figure it out, but it was as if she knew him her whole life. That's what scared her. It was the instant attraction and the instant feelings that were illogical to her. She was really tempted, but she wanted to say "no", and somehow his eyes compelled her to say "yes".

"Okay, I'll go. But it has to be a short ride with no major highways, or interstates. We also can't go far from the campus because I need to get back and get my car so I can go home and do my homework."

"Great, let's head out now."

Before she could say another word, he left money on the table and grabbed her hand. The two of them took off quickly toward the bike. He took out a helmet from the side bag, and placed it on the seat. He then put her books and handbag into the side bag and locked it. He handed her the helmet.

"Are you always prepared with an extra helmet," she asked.

He smiled and said, "Well, you just never know who you might meet."

She gave a smirk and put it on and watched as he started the bike. She was nervous inside, but an adrenaline rush of excitement was engulfing her as well. She held onto his shoulder and slowly slid onto the seat behind him. She placed her arms around his waist to hold on. She jerked a little as he slowly took off. Her mind was racing, *I can't believe I'm doing this*, she thought. *I must be crazy. This is insane.* Her head was positioned close to his, and she could smell the scent of his cologne. The aroma of his cologne mixed with the leather of his jacket was intoxicating, and she could feel the desire inside herself grow. He was captivating her, and she knew it. She began to relax and allow herself to go with the flow of the ride. As they rode together, she felt her guard go down and her body become one with him and the Harley.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PAST

Gabby maneuvered her red Camaro down the Long Island Expressway and sang out loud to tunes on the radio. Putting on her blinker, she changed lanes. She felt really good. The motorcycle ride was exhilarating, and it made her feel alive. She loved it, but didn't want him to know.

"Holy shit!" she exclaimed while looking at the clock on the dashboard. She hadn't realized the time. *Mom will be worried*, she thought. She came to a screech as the traffic slowed down, and impatiently, she began to tap her fingers on the door. "Come on! Come on! Let's move people," she yelled at the cars as if they could hear her.

Finally, the traffic began to move quicker. Driving down the road, she tried to keep focused, but her mind was still thinking of Bryan and the motorcycle ride. Being on the bike with him was euphoric. It was fun and exciting. During the ride, she felt a rush that was non-restraining, and she loved it. She smiled as she thought about it, and him. She could still smell the scent of his cologne as it lingered in her memory. She saw her exit ahead and turned on her blinker. As she drove the car off the expressway, she realized that he really had captivated her.

The Visconti's lived on the North Shore of Long Island. It was an opulent community where every home was large with well manicured lawns and backyards that butted up to the Long Island Sound. Her parents' house was right on the water with two hundred feet of private beach in the back yard. It was a wonderful neighborhood full of successful career people, stay at home Moms, and kids riding their bicycles and playing ball after school. As she drove her car up the huge circular drive, Gabriella, for probably the first time, realized where she came from. The house was huge. It wasn't an ordinary house in middle class America. *Visconti's*, Bryan's words played in her head. The way he reacted made her realize that her world was not the norm. Glancing over the large lawn, she saw her mother sitting on a swing under the huge sugar maple tree. Opening the door and getting out of the car, Gabby started to walk toward her.

Sophia Visconti was an attractive woman in her fifties. She sat on the swing and let her youthful appearance come to life. She didn't look her age, and she never did. Her auburn hair was shoulder length and full. Her heart shaped face was like Gabriella's. She had deep brown eyes that were intense and smoldering. She resembled a movie star from a Hollywood that didn't exist anymore; the glamorous Hollywood of the forties where women were mysterious and alluring. Sophia Visconti loved all of her children, but Gabriella was different. It was Gabriella that resembled Sophia the most.

Gabriella, being the youngest, spent more time alone with her mother than her siblings did. Her brother, Michael, was a stockbroker who chose not to go into the family business and work for his father. Instead, he wanted to be his own man and have his own success. Her sister,

Juliana, lived in White Plains as a stay at home Mom with two children. Juliana's husband, Thomas, was a business man in the garment industry.

Gabriella, being almost ten years younger than her brother and her sister, was considered the baby of the family. She was labeled very naive by her siblings because she always believed life was easy, and that her father could fix anything. Michael and Juliana always tried to get her to be a little bit more realistic and to see that her ideals were more fantasy than reality.

"Gabby, you're not Cinderella and life is not a fairy tale," Juliana would say.

Deep down Gabriella knew that Juliana was right since she had two children, a husband and a very busy life. However, Gabriella still believed in more, like in miracles, fairytales, and a knight in shining armor on a horse.

Being years apart made a relationship with her siblings difficult. Gabriella was protected by everyone, and it was a protection that she liked and disliked. It was a protection that she, at times, wanted to run away from.

"Hi Mom!" she said, while leaning over and giving Sophia a kiss on the cheek.

"Hi baby, how was school?" Sophia asked as she gently pushed aside Gabriella's long curls from the front of her face.

"Oh, it was good, same as always," Gabriella said as she sat down on the swing next to her mother. The cedar wood swing sat to the side of the front yard. It was large enough for three people. It had been a staple in their front yard for many years. Gabriella's father placed the swing there when Gabriella was little so that she could enjoy it. From under the large sugar maple, you could look into the back and see the view of the water. Tilting her head back, she let the breeze that was blowing gently caress her face. Looking up at the tree, she could see a hint of winter as the leaves were almost a distant memory.

"You're late. I was starting to worry," Sophia said.

"Oh . . . sorry, Mom, I, um . . . got caught up at school with a teacher."

"Is something wrong?" Sophia asked.

"No. Nothing's the matter. Why do you ask?"

"You seem preoccupied. Is school okay?"

"Yes, Mama, school is just fine."

"How come you didn't show up at the hall?" Sophia asked curiously.

"The hall? Oh, shit . . . I forgot about that," Gabriella said quickly.

"Well, your father didn't. I might add he's not happy that you forgot."

"Oh no, I was supposed to go there and do some work on the calendar."

"What happened with your class that made you so late?"

Gabby lost her train of thought. "Nothing happened with a class," she said.

Sophia looked confused. "Gabby, you just said you were late because of a class."

"Um . . . I did, didn't I?" Gabby said off guard.

"Yes, you did. Let me guess. It wasn't a class, was it?"

Gabby didn't ever lie to Sophia, and she didn't want to start.

"No, Mama, it wasn't a class."

"Was it a boy?" her mother questioned. "Come on Gabriella, I know you very well, what's up?"

"Oh, Mom, I met a boy today, that's all."

"That's all?" Sophia smiled. "This boy seems to have captivated my youngest daughter."

Gabriella smiled back at her mom. "He seems really nice, and I don't know . . . I think, I might like him," she said.

"So what's wrong with that?" Sophia asked.

Gabby noticed Sophia's puzzled expression as she answered her, "Well . . . I think he's probably all wrong for me."

A strong gust of wind blew. The tree's limbs rustled and swayed. Sophia laughed. She

smiled and looked up at the clear sky while swinging on the tree and said, "Oh, I love the fall."

"Oh, Mama, you love all the seasons. Besides, it's almost winter time."

"I know, but the seasons reflect our lives. And without winter we cannot appreciate spring. Maybe by spring love will bloom in your heart for this boy."

"Please, Mama, I just met him. Love does not happen that fast. You watch too many romance movies," Gabriella said laughingly as she pushed her legs to give momentum to the swing. Inside herself, she knew she liked him, but she didn't want anyone else to know. "Besides . . . I really do think he's wrong for me," she added.

"Gabriella, you just met him. Give him a chance. Don't over analyze people; you're too young for that. You know sometimes the ones you least likely suspect are the right ones. He's probably an opposite attraction."

"I don't know, Mom, he's definitely sure of himself. Actually, he seems maybe too sure for me. I think he's wilder than me, too."

Sophia laughed out loud. "Gabriella you're twenty, not eighty! Maybe you should be a little wild at times. Not too wild, but wild enough. Don't you know opposites attract?"

"What about you and Daddy, are you opposite?"

Sophia stopped the swing and looked at her daughter saying, "Oh yes, most definitely."

"Your father is far more conservative, power hungry, controlling, and stricter than I am." Sophia smiled. "But I love him anyway. He's a business man who spends most of his life at his business. We are different in many ways. Your father's spiritual life is different than mine. I mean, he never goes to church with me or likes to talk about faith or even love for that matter. I always tell him that if he finally started to come with me the priest would be in shock thinking the end of the world was imminent." They both laughed. "When we first met it was my cousin Nina that your father was interested in. But I thought he was handsome, so I convinced him that Nina was boring and I was fun."

Gabriella looked at her mother. "You stole Daddy from Aunt Nina?" she asked.

Sophia shaking her head and laughing said, "Well, I wouldn't call it stealing. Aunt Nina brought him to a family party on a first date, and we hit it off instead of them. It was okay. They weren't right for each other anyway. At first, Aunt Nina was mad, but she got over it."

Gabriella was laughing by this time imagining her parents young. "So Mom, does Daddy work too much? Does he ignore you?"

Sophia got quiet and Gabby noticed Sophia's facial expression change to a more serious tone.

"No, not really," Sophia said. "Your father and I have a wonderful relationship. I admit that in the beginning, with the business, I felt a little ignored. As time went on, I began to understand his desire to provide the best for his family. I grew up, and I started to see what responsibility does to a man. Gabby, I'm a lot more carefree than he is, and I always have been. I like to go out, and travel, and throw parties with a lot of family and friends."

Gabriella sat there attentively listening. "Your father enjoys it too, and he knows how important it is to me, but sometimes, I think he would rather work than party. To him the parties and socializing is a way to advance his position in society, and his assets. He is really a man who is more of the world. All I do know is that he loves me, and I love him. That's what marriage is about, understanding each other's wants and needs and accepting them into your own life."

Sophia grabbed Gabriella's nails. "I see you have destroyed four nails. You must really like this guy," she said with a grin.

Gabriella gave her mom a sarcastic look. "I think he thinks he's Mr. Wonderful. He's a little too sure of himself."

"Oh!" Sophia said. "Maybe he is wonderful. Does he require as much attention as you do?"

"Huh! Mom, what do you mean by that?"

Sophia started to laugh. "Gabriella you require a lot of attention. Maybe you have met a

man who poses a challenge to you. You haven't dated that much and you have plenty of time to, but if you always turn them down before you get to know them, you'll never find that special someone. To be honest, at first, I didn't really like your father. I thought he was stubborn and pigheaded." Sophia gave a smirk and a giggle as she continued to speak, "As I think about it now, I was right, he is." Sophia laughed out loud along with Gabby and continued to talk. "He was a challenge, and I wanted to bug Nina, and look what happened. You know, after a while of being married to him, I realized that I'm stubborn and pigheaded too. So, we have a lot in common. He keeps me grounded, and trust me I need it. You're young my darling. Go on a date or two with him and if you don't like him, then you move on."

"You make it sound so easy, Mom," Gabriella said.

"You know what I mean." Sophia grinned. "Now, I'm going to go inside and help Louisa make dinner." Sophia got up and started to walk toward the house. "What's his name?" she yelled back,

"Bryan, Bryan McHolland," Gabriella said.

"Oh good, he's not Italian. Don't tell your father, though," her mother yelled with a smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PAST

The car came around the circular drive and stopped in front of the large portico that was supported by huge columns. Vito Visconti put the Mercedes in park and opened the car door. Leaning over the seat, he grabbed his Armani jacket and closed the door. He walked slowly up the stone steps and into the house. As he placed his black leather briefcase onto the round table in the large foyer, he scanned the spiral staircase. He walked into the dining room and noticed that the table was set for two. The crystal chandelier hung majestically above the center of the table and illuminated a dim glow. Pulling out the large mahogany chair that sat at the end of the long table, he sat down. He stared at the picture of Tuscany that was hanging on the wall. His dark brown eyes penetrated the large canvas. It was a beautiful piece of art that was given to him by a client. He sat up in a proper posture with a stern expression on his face. He was serious, always serious as his mind continuously thought about his business and his family. He was five foot ten by height, but his presence in the business world displayed a taller man. He had worked hard to get to this point in society where respect was automatically given to him, and not needed to be earned anymore. He was Vito Visconti and that was all that mattered.

“I’ll get it! I’ll get the phone!” Gabriella shouted from upstairs.

“What is she yelling about?” Vito asked Sophia as she entered the dining room.

“Oh, Vito, don’t worry about it, she’s a girl, a young girl. She’s excited and full of energy,” Sophia said as she walked over and gave her husband a kiss.

“How was your day, Vito?” Sophia asked as she sat at the end of the table across from her husband to have dinner.

“It was fine. Busy though . . . very busy. As he poured himself a glass of wine, he asked, “What about Gabriella? She’s not eating dinner?” he continued.

“Oh, she isn’t hungry. She’ll eat later. She has some big project to do for school. You know once Gabriella gets going on her art work, she gets lost for hours.”

Vito took a sip of his wine and grumbled, “I don’t know about art, but she has to eat. Also, did you ask her why she didn’t show up at work today?”

“Yes. I did. She had an appointment at school that she couldn’t miss,” Sophia said.

“School, oh well, I guess it’s important too. I don’t know these children, they’re all grown and they think they know everything. I know that college is important to her, but what is she going to do with this degree when she could work for me full time instead.”

“She likes school, Vito. And besides, she has ambitions of her own.”

“Ambitions, I know about ambitions. I had many of them for myself and for my family. Gabriella is all caught up in school when she does not need it. Besides, what if she meets someone and leaves school to get married. That could happen. And then all this fancy education

is worth nothing. You know, Sophia, once Gabriella leaves it will just be the two of us, alone in this house.”

“Think of how wonderful that will be, Vito,” Sophia said in a frisky voice.

“Sophia, let’s be serious!” he snapped.

“Why do we have to be serious?” she said as she took a sip of her wine.

Vito put down his glass and said, “Sophia, this house is too big for us. We should think about getting something else, maybe . . . selling it,” he said seriously.

Sophia was shocked. “Vito, we have lived in this house for twenty-five years. Once the business became successful, it was the first thing you wanted. I’m surprised you would want to sell it.”

“I always believed that one of our children would live here with us and with their children. But Michael lives in Port Washington, and Juliana is in White Plains, and Gabriella, well . . . who knows what she’s going to do,” he said sadly.

Sophia slowly got up from her chair and walked to her husband. Pulling out the chair next to him, she sat down. “You’re right,” she said calmly, “this place may be too big for us, now. Well . . . we could get a nice apartment in Manhattan,” she said with a smile. “The commute wouldn’t be that bad for you, and Louisa could still live with us. It might be exciting to live in the city.”

“Manhattan!” a loud voice bellowed while entering the dining room. “I might have to retire if you two move to New York City. I don’t know if I could handle the hustle and bustle. I’m too old for that,” Louisa said as she put a bowl of Romano cheese on the table and walked back out of the room.

“Don’t worry,” Vito said. “The hustle and bustle of the city all the time might be too much for me too, and besides, I would miss my beach too much. I just figured one day I would retire and stay here and play with my grandchildren. I always believed Michael would run the business.”

Sophia shook her head and said, “Vito, he had to follow his own dreams; that’s what life is about. Besides, you retire? It would kill you not to have a business to go to.”

Sophia got up and stood behind her husband and put her arms around him. “My darling husband, for thirty-five years you have worked at that business of yours and it’s as much a part of you as your family. You nursed it from a baby and made it what it is today. You could never leave it. What would you do, move to Florida like your cousins and play golf? You don’t even like golf. Having to put a little ball in a hole would drive you crazy. You need to have power in your life, Vito.”

“You know me so well,” Vito said as he let his hand run across her arm.

Sophia kept her arms around him as Vito wheeled her around onto his lap. “Well, maybe being alone without the children would be fun for us?” he questioned.

Sophia started to laugh. “What do you have in mind?” she said with a grin.

He started to kiss her. “I love you,” he said. “You have been the inspiration for me, forever. You’ve been there supporting me in all I wanted to do. You even gave up your own dreams to be here and raise the children. I know I work a lot, and at times, I’m not home.”

Her hand graced the side of his face stopping at his neck. Leaning forward, she kissed him. “I didn’t give up anything. I love my life, and my family. Yes, I had big dreams. I was also a wild spirit, and without you there to hold me down, I probably wouldn’t have all the love that I have with my family. Vito, I wouldn’t change anything. I love you so much,” she said as she gently kissed his lips.

Gabriella came running down the staircase in a rush and headed toward the front door yelling, “I’m heading out with Francesca!”

Vito yelled back, “Wait a minute, come over here!”

Sophia got up and headed to her chair.

He saw Gabriella stop at the front door, and give a sigh. Then she turned around, walked

through the foyer, and came into the dining room.

“Where are you going?” her father asked.

“Oh, Daddy, I’m just going to Turnarounds, that club in Great Neck.”

Vito smiled and looked at his beautiful daughter all dressed up. “What about some dinner?”

“I’ll grab a bite with Francesca,” she said as she walked over to Vito. “I won’t be late, Daddy, and I’ll be careful. Oh, and I’m sorry about not showing up at work. I had to meet with a professor.” Leaning over, she gave her father a kiss.

“I know. Your mother told me, but next time you better call. You have responsibilities there, Gabriella, and I want you to remember that.”

“I will, Daddy. I promise.”

“Here take some money,” Vito said as he took his wallet out of his pants.

“I have money on me, Daddy.”

“Gabriella, you can never have enough money. Here, put this in your wallet,” he said firmly.

Gabriella took the money and smiled. She turned and headed out the room.

“Two o’clock!” Vito yelled out to her as she walked away. “Gabriella!” he continued to yell.

She yelled back, “I know, I know, two o’clock!”

The parking lot was packed as Gabby pulled in and scanned for a parking spot. She could tell already that Turnarounds was going to be crowded. She hated crowds and the chaos that most clubs offered, but she liked to go out and be among people.

“Come on, people, don’t take all damn day!” she said out loud with frustration in her voice.

She waited and watched as two people walked arm and arm towards their car. Slowly, she followed them and waited impatiently for them to pull out.

“Okay, buddy, cool your pits and wait your turn,” she said into the rearview mirror as the car behind her honked his horn. She parked the car and took a deep breath. Checking her makeup in the mirror, she began to regret coming there, but she promised Frankie she would show up. Walking up the deck to the entrance, she could feel the beat of the drums as the deck bounced under her heels. The resonating sound of electric guitars filled the air, and the building itself was bouncing and alive as she approached the doors. She noticed the stares and heard the whistles from the men that graced the balcony above as she strolled by. It made her feel good at first, and then, like a piece of steak in the hands of a butcher.

Why am I here, she thought.

“Hey, Bobby!” she yelled as the bouncer winked at her and opened the huge wooden doors to the ultimate beach shack. As she walked into the club, she quickly adjusted her eyes to the darkness. She was right . . . it was packed. Wall to wall people filled the place and it was still early. Turnaround’s was the ultimate beach party. It was huge with three dance floors, three bars spaced strategically around, pool tables and a restaurant to the side with a separate entrance. It was dark inside with the only light coming from strobe lights that moved in all directions.

“Gabby!” a familiar voice yelled out as she walked towards the main bar.

“Oh, hey guys!” Gabby yelled back.

“Are you looking for Frankie?”

“What!” Gabby yelled since she could barely hear them over the deafening music.

“Frankie’s at the bar in the back, by the windows!”

“Okay!” she yelled with a nod. *By the windows, the whole damn place was windows,* she thought. Heading towards the back, she bumped into people who were standing and dancing

where they stood. The smell of liquor, perfume, and cigarettes filled the air and made her want to go back outside. As she plowed her way through the dense crowd like a Mack truck with high beams on a foggy night, she saw Frankie in the distance glued in conversation with a bartender that looked more like a weight lifter.

Tapping her on the shoulder, she lured Frankie away from her conversation.

“Gabby!” Frankie yelled and gave her a hug.

“Thank God, you’re wearing stilettos, it makes you taller than the crowd and easier to find!” Gabby yelled in an attempt to over-power the music.

It was a true statement though, Frankie was five foot eight, and with three inch heels added to that height, she was transformed into a runway model. She was tall and thin but curvy where curves needed to be. Her long brown hair was darker than Gabby’s, and straight. She had fair skin and green eyes; a trait she got from her mother.

“Let’s go outside because it’s way too loud in here!” Gabby yelled.

Nodding her head, Frankie grabbed her drink and waved at the bartender. Together, she and Gabby maneuvered their way through the crowd and outside to the deck.

“Fresh air, thank you,” Gabby said.

“The band tonight is great. Gabby, check out the base player . . . he’s hot.”

Gabby scanned the band and nodded in agreement that he was hot. The deck was filled with people, but not crowded. It was a chilly night, and the cool breeze off of the water made it feel colder than it was. Pulling her jacket closed, she motioned to Frankie to follow her to the table that opened up by one of the fire pits. The dark wood floor was stressed, giving it an old appearance. Tables with umbrellas were positioned sporadically around, and a dining area was situated under the canopy. Young lovers walked arm and arm on the dock.

“I wonder what his name is,” Francesca said.

Gabriella looked at her friend and started to laugh. She could see Frankie make eye contact with the base player, and that made him move closer to their table. He moved his hands with rhythm over the strings as Frankie flirted. Gabby watched and started to feel invisible. The waiter came, took their order, and winked at Frankie as he left.

“He’s cute too,” Frankie said with a smile.

“I love watching you in action. I don’t know how you do it. The guys just flock to you”.

Francesca leaned back in the chair with her eyes set on the base player. “It’s a gift, I’ve just got it,” she said with a playful smile.

“Okay,” Francesca said as she turned to face Gabby. “What’s his name?” she asked.

Gabriella looked at her and said, “Bryan McHolland.”

“Is he cute?” Francesca asked.

“Of course he’s cute, that’s the problem!”

“That’s a problem? Gabby, you need to get your priorities straight; cute is definitely not a problem. What’s he studying?”

Gabriella said, “Pre-law . . . I think. He says he’s going to law school.”

Francesca started to laugh. “Oh, my God, aren’t they all? Unless of course it’s med school. Okay, so we have a cute pre-law student who seems to like you and you think it’s a problem. I’m missing something here. Why are you apprehensive? I don’t get it. You seem almost nervous instead of excited.”

Gabriella looked at Francesca. “I don’t know. I think he’s too wild for me,” she said.

Francesca gave a chuckle and said, “You don’t even know him yet. Besides, aren’t legal eagles the geeky kind?”

Gabriella sat back in the chair. “Not this one. I can tell. I think I’m too conservative for him. He rides a motorcycle. I think he lives in a fast lane, and you know me . . .”

Francesca leaned in and quickly interrupted, “Yeah, I know you,” she said with a frown. “Little miss goodie-two-shoes. Don’t do anything that’s not in your planner, or . . . something that will upset Daddy.”

“Hey, don’t be sarcastic!”

“Sarcastic! Gabriella, this is me, Francesca DeLuca, your best friend since grade school. I think I know you pretty well, your Sandi from *Grease*. Maybe it’s time to pack on some leather and have fun on that bike. I know you want to,” she said with a smirk.

The waiter returned with more drinks and said, “Here you go ladies.”

Francesca smiled at him as he put the drinks down onto the table. He smiled back at her as Gabriella watched the interchange between the two of them. When the waiter left, she looked at Francesca. “How do you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?” Frankie asked as she took a sip of her drink.

“Flirt so easily,” Gabby remarked.

“Oh, that.” Frankie laughed. “It’s a given talent that I have. But we’re not here to discuss me and my issues we’re here to discuss you and your issues.”

Gabriella lifted her glass and took a sip of her drink and said, “Issues! Me have issues? So, I’m slightly conservative.”

Francesca laughed out loud. “Slightly, oh come on, Gabby, you’re still a virgin,” she said a little loudly.

“Keep your voice down!” Gabriella exclaimed. “The whole damn world doesn’t have to know.”

“Okay, Okay.” Francesca moved in a little closer to the table and so did Gabby. “I’m sorry. I forgot it was a secret. Look, Gabby, I love you like a sister. You know that for some reason every time you’re attracted to a guy you get nervous. I mean, let’s face it, you’re always attracted to the same kind, and yes, they’re always a little bit wild, and yes, you always resist it. Why don’t you just go with it? Even in high school, boys didn’t ask you out because you were ugly; it was because you were reserved. It was like you were afraid. Besides, everything with you was school and having a plan with college and life. That scares guys away. They just want to have fun and not be serious. I know there are guys like that who have a plan all written in stone, but then again they don’t look like the guys you usually fall for. Gabriella, you’re an attractive, young woman who likes to have fun. Go with it.”

Gabriella sat back. “I have plans, Frankie. I want a career, a house, kids, security. Most guys I meet are not on the same wave length,” she said.

Francesca frowned. “Maybe because the typical nine-to-five Joe, who works on the yard on Saturday and Sunday, doesn’t really appeal to you. You talk about security. Gabby, there is no security except in your faith and yourself. Fear is what causes people to not feel secure. It’s because of doubt and lack of confidence. Life is life. You have to live life for today . . . take what it gives you for the moment . . . plan something for the future, but live for today.” Francesca opened up her purse and took out her lipstick. Putting it on she asked, “Are you going out with him tomorrow night or are you going to be afraid?”

Gabriella got quiet and began to bite her lower lip. Then she stopped and looked straight at her and said, “I’m not afraid.”

“Good bluff. Yes, you are. You’re afraid, and you’re being negative. You never think positive about anything. How are you going to discover anything if you don’t allow yourself a journey that maybe you didn’t plan? Gabby, people are afraid to live. They get themselves caught up in trying to control everything they can. They stay in their little box; their little comfort zone. There’s a balance to life. No extremes, just a balance.”

Taking a sip of her drink, Gabby collected her thoughts. She was afraid, and she hated the fact that Frankie was right. “Okay!” she finally said it, “I want to go out with him.”

“Then do it. Be open to a little adventure. He has something you want; otherwise you wouldn’t be this anxious about it.”

“Are we going into psychiatry 101?”

“Well, it is my major. Hell, I need to practice on someone.”

“Great! So I’m the chosen one?”

“Well, you do need help.”

“So did Frankenstein.”

The two of them started to laugh as the band continued to play in the background.

The clothes were thrown everywhere. Gabby must have tried on twenty different outfits, and she still didn't like her reflection in the mirror. In a huff, she took off her top. “I hate my body,” she said out loud. Turning to a side profile, she tried to suck in her stomach. “No use!” she yelled at the reflection, “That bulge is still there, damn it. Why do I bother?” She walked over to the closet and started to peruse through the garments that were hung in order and in such a meticulous manner. Every designer label stared back at her and yet nothing was right. She began to fix the strap to her bra when she heard the knock on the door.

Gabby yelled, “Come in!”

Sophia walked into Gabriella's room and just stopped. “A definite fashion problem I see here,” she said while laughing.

“Not funny, Mom! I have nothing to wear!” Gabriella yelled as she threw another top onto the pile on the bed.

Sophia walked toward the closet. “You have a zillion clothes. Didn't you buy a new outfit this morning for tonight?” she asked.

Turning towards her mom and making a frown, she said, “I don't like it!”

Sitting on the bed and laughing, Sophia spoke, “This guy is definitely something if he can throw you into a tizzy over clothes. Wear jeans and a sweater. Besides, why do you care? I didn't think you liked him that much. So, you do want to attract him?”

“Yes . . . I mean no . . . I mean, I don't know yet. Mom, stop mixing up what I say!”

“I'm not, you are. Gabriella, if he asked you out, he's already attracted to you. The clothes won't matter. Where are you going anyway?”

“To dinner.”

“Where?”

“I don't know. He said to dress casual.”

Gabriella stood there with her hands on her hips looking into the mirror. She could see the reflection of her room behind her. It was a beautiful *princess room*. The furniture was carved ornate white wood. Light wooden floors were the canvas for the huge multi-pastel colored area rug which sat in the center of the room. A large canopy bed was positioned against the far wall, and a plush lavender chair sat in the corner with a basket of magazines next to it. There was sheer lavender fabric hanging from behind the bed and also flowing on the windows as drapes.

Her bedroom had French doors that went out to a veranda that overlooked the Long Island Sound. The water was practically their backyard, and Gabriella would enjoy sitting on the beach all day long and hanging out with her friends. She loved to sit outside on the veranda and paint. Keeping an easel in her room with her art supplies gave her the ability to paint from the veranda at any time. She was an artist in her heart and found solitude and soul searching through

painting, drawing, and writing.

“Mom, why am I like this?”

“Like what honey?”

“Like, so insecure with boys. I really like him, and I want everything to be perfect. I just don’t think he’s going to like me back. Frankie says that I’m so insecure about myself that I run away from the boys I like. She also thinks that I’m afraid Daddy won’t like him.”

“Well, Gabriella, Francesca might be right. I know you’re insecure in a lot of things you do. I don’t understand why. Sometimes, I think it’s because you were the baby of the family, and everyone always did for you, especially your father. He always made decisions for you, so maybe you’re afraid to make decisions now as you become an adult. He does try to protect you a lot, and you value his opinions immensely. He has always had an influence in your life and what you did. You’re like him in a lot of ways. You want to control all your surroundings in order to keep everything the same, and you hate change. It’s funny that you seem to like boys that are uncontrollable. That could be what frightens you.” Sophia walked over to her daughter and took hold of her hands and said, “You, my darling daughter, are bright and vivacious. Just be your self. Dress the way you would if you were going out with Francesca or any of your other friends. If he doesn’t like you after tonight, than he isn’t worth it.”

Gabriella kissed her mom on the cheek. “Thanks Mom,” she said. Getting up and looking into the mirror, Gabby smiled at her reflection. She had on jeans that fell just below her belly button with a simple black sweater, and a pair of ankle length, high heeled, Calvin Klein boots. “This will do,” she said. Her curly brown hair fell down her back when she took the clip out. She sat down at the vanity and began to put her make-up on. She heard a car pull up the drive way and turned toward the window. Sophia went to the window and pulled back the curtain to look outside. “I believe Bryan is here. Does he have a black car?” she asked.

Gabriella turned to her mom and said, “Yes, and a motorcycle.”

“A motorcycle?” Sophia questioned.

“It’s black and cool. But I told him not to bring it tonight because I figured Daddy would . . .”

“You figured right,” Sophia retorted. “Your father would not have liked that. Now, I did once date a boy who had a motorcycle, and I must admit that it was fun. I mean, being on the back of the bike is fun and exciting in a sexy way.”

“I know, Mama, it really is!”

Sophia looked away from the window and towards Gabby. “It is?” she asked.

“Oops,” Gabriella said as she just stood there in shock.

“When did you go for a ride, Gabriella?”

She was caught, and she knew it. “Yesterday, Mama, it was yesterday.”

“That’s why you didn’t go to work. Isn’t it?”

“Mama, please! I’m old enough to make my own decisions. I’m not a little girl who needs permission to go on a motorcycle with a man.”

“I never said you did, you’re the one defending what you did.”

Gabby stopped talking and looked helplessly at Sophia.

“I won’t say anything to your father, but don’t keep it a secret. He does worry about you,” Sophia said seriously.

“I know he does, but we’re taking a car tonight. Bryan says it’s a muscle car from the Sixties, and he’s very into it.”

“All men love their cars. Your father did too,” Sophia said as she walked over to Gabriella. “Have fun tonight, and by the way, don’t try to find a boy that will please your father. I don’t think there really is one out there.”

“Oh, great Mom, that’s really encouraging.”

Staring into the mirror, Sophia looked at her reflection and smiled. “Look at me, I’m in my fifties and I still look good,” she said with a grin.

Gabriella smiled. "Oh, Mom, I love your self-confidence."
"You have self-confidence, too. Remember, you are my daughter as well as your father's."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PAST

Portofino's was a dimly lit, quaint, and hidden restaurant that was on the beach. As the car pulled into the parking lot, Gabriella could hear the ocean breeze as it sounded like the soft whisper of a fading orchestra playing. The night was calm, and the sky was clear allowing thousands of stars to twinkle in the distance as if they were painted so perfectly with a shimmer that sparkled like diamonds.

"This place is pretty packed in the summer, but during the fall it's not so crowded," Bryan said as he got out of the car. Walking around to the passenger door, he opened it for her.

"I'd rather come here now when it's quiet. I'm a hopeless romantic," she said while smiling at him.

"Oh, let me guess, you love those gushy novels that make women weep," he said as he closed the door to his car.

She laughed. "You guessed it," she said slightly blushing.

He gently took her hand as they walked into Portofino's, and she liked it. He asked for a table near the window. The room was dark, and a fire was blazing in the fireplace that was built in a circle in the center of the room. The rich burgundy color of the carpet was enhanced by the walnut wood tables and high back chairs that were draped in beautiful fabric of pale pink with matching napkins. Each table had a glass candle holder with a dim flame glowing from the center.

There were only two other couples in the restaurant. *This is so romantic*, thought Gabriella as the waiter pulled out her chair and handed her a napkin.

The restaurant was already decorated for the Christmas season with trees and poinsettias positioned in different locations. The tables were far enough away from each other to keep conversations quiet and private. It was totally romantic, and Gabriella felt her guard go down and her heart float away.

"Would you like a drink?" the waiter asked after they got seated.

"White wine, please," Gabriella answered in a low soothing voice.

"And for the gentleman?" he said as he turned to face Bryan.

"I'll have the same," Bryan said as he took the menu.

The waiter needed to see identification which showed they were both of legal age to drink. As Gabriella went to put the license away, Bryan asked to see a picture that fell out of her wallet. She picked up the picture and with a smile, she handed it to him.

“That’s a great picture of you. You look beautiful in that sexy black dress.”

She smiled and felt her face blush with embarrassment. “Thank you,” she said. “I usually don’t come out very well in photos, but this was a good day.”

“Well, aren’t you modest,” Bryan said.

“You started the conversation,” Gabriella replied.

“Who’s that with you?”

“Oh . . . my best friend, Francesca, but everyone calls her Frankie.”

“She’s very pretty.”

Gabby felt a bit of jealousy at his words and tried not to make a face. *Pretty, everyone thinks Frankie is pretty*, she thought to herself. “Yes, Frankie is pretty,” Gabby said unenthusiastically while shaking her head in agreement.

The waiter came with their drinks, and they ordered dinner. They sat there for hours talking and laughing. As she listened to him talk about his dreams, plans for law school and his future, she felt herself sinking into his words. His eyes were vibrant, and she melted at his smile. He had this charismatic charm that could definitely capture you, and she thought, keep you forever. She questioned him about prior girlfriends, and he was honest in telling her that he dated a lot, but there was never a true serious relationship. Most of the girls were nice and fun, but none made him want to settle down into a real commitment.

She told him about her boyfriends which were few and far between, and she talked about her first love at sixteen that lasted only two months. She could tell he was very surprised to know that she didn’t have a lot of boyfriends banging down the door to ask her out, and that made her feel good. She felt his glance attentively upon her as she talked. He made her feel at ease, and it brought out her true personality. She felt calm as if she knew him forever.

Bryan watched her attentively as she spoke. He liked the way her brown curly hair draped far down her back and shoulders. As far as he was concerned, she was a wonderful sight to look at indefinitely. There was an innocence about her which made her different from the other girls he knew. As he listened to her talk, he found himself being drawn into her playful attitude and lively expressions. She was vibrant with a vitality that lit up the room. He was enchanted by her attitude and her slight sarcastic wit, and he liked the feeling he had while with her. “Would you like to walk outside on the docks?” Bryan asked when the waiter brought the check.

“I’d love too,” she said.

He paid the bill, and as they got up to leave, they both realized the restaurant was empty. Only the waiter and Maitre’ D were there. Bryan and Gabby headed out the back French doors onto the patio and walked towards the rail where they could see the moon give light to the ocean. She was startled as the outside music was turned on, and looking at Bryan with a grin, she asked, “Did you plan this?”

He smiled. “I wish I could take the credit,” he said as he gently grabbed her at the waist.

“It’s chilly out here tonight,” Gabriella said with a slight shiver.

“I can keep you warm. Come here and let my big arms protect you from the wind.”

“Protect me? It’s funny you said that. You’re going to think I’m weird, but I’ve felt a strange feeling of security since I first met you. Do you believe in pre-destination?”

“Ah, those philosophy classes are making you think. This could be dangerous.”

She gave him a playful smack on his shoulder. “Oh, you’re funny. So, ah, you don’t think an art major can be as intellectual as a law major?”

He gave her a soft playful kiss on her cheek. “I believe you’re very intellectual and smart. I mean, you’re here . . . with me . . . aren’t you?”

“Aren’t we conceded,” she said with a flirtatious smile.

They turned simultaneously to look out over the rail at the stars. “There must be a million

stars out tonight,” Gabriella said. “They’re twinkling so bright that you can see a silver reflection off of the water. They’re so beautiful. I love looking at the stars,” she said.

“Me too,” Bryan said as he looked up to the sky. “Sometimes I take my telescope out at night to look at the planets and the solar system. My dad is very interested in astronomy, and he got me started in it when I was around ten.”

He put his arms around her tighter. Gabriella slowly turned around to face him. He held her in his massive arms that felt so strong and engulfed her body like a glove. He looked deep into her eyes and felt a real connection to her. He wondered if she felt the same way.

“Bryan?”

“What?” he whispered in her ear.

“Do you believe in soul mates?”

He pulled away slightly to look at her face. He knew she was serious. “What do you mean by soul mates?” he asked softly.

“You know . . . two people that are meant to meet and be together. Two people meant to be there for each other, no matter what. Two souls connected to help each other go through life.”

He looked at her. “I believe that there can be that one person out there who helps to make us become who we’re supposed to be, and I believe people need to be open in their heart in order to find them. They need to not be afraid and to let themselves go . . . to trust.”

He pulled her close to him as she draped her arms around his neck. Their eyes met for a second, and then, as if pre-destined, their lips met. They kissed passionately as if it was never to end. He could feel her body melt in his arms as she kissed him back.

They kissed for a while and when their lips finally parted, Gabby felt as if her breath had been taken away. *It’s too quick, she thought; too fast. But I liked it. I wanted it. And oh my God, it was so good.* Her thoughts rambled as she stared into his eyes.

She couldn’t believe the power it had over her; it engulfed her with such a wave. Standing there in the moonlight, lost in each other’s arms, they kissed again as the moon and the stars gleamed in the background. As they walked hand in hand to the car, Gabby knew that Bryan was different, very different. She knew that her life had just taken a turn and it excited her, but it slightly scared her as well. It was a beautiful night that marked the beginning of a relationship that would take Gabriella on a journey that she hadn’t planned.

