

Prologue

A Message from Michael

Until I met Grace Russo, I did not know that my Lacoste shirts did not have to be dry-cleaned. In this area alone, she has saved me a very tidy sum. But in matters of serious significance, quite simply, Grace has changed my world. She showed me how to understand and value love, and on a lighter note, to crave all things Italian. But that's not why I love her.

I was a lonely guy, living in a world of lab rats, trying to discover a way to save humanity from any and all illness. I lived on Chinese takeout, pizza to go, loose women, deli roasted chickens, baseball, frustration and beer. Grace popped into my life like a cork exploding from a bottle of champagne. Okay maybe Asti Spumante, but something highly explosive. Oh, she thought she was all kind of chill sophistication, but she was nothing but effervescence. Truth? Just being around her pumped carbonation into my veins, too. This bub-

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bling and rumbling of volcanic eruption began the very first night we met. No one was more surprised than I was, except for Grace. We were avowed nonbubblers and the living embodiments of the immovable object meeting the irresistible force. Two hard-core cynics met their match and two other innocents out there were saved from our callous foibles. It may not sound romantic to you, but no one has ever accused me of being sentimental. Or Grace.

Why am I telling you this? I'm getting my two cents in now because once Grace starts telling you our story, I won't be able to get a word in with a crowbar. Grace is a wonderful gal, but she can be very chatty, especially when she is excited about something. Anyway, here's what I would like for you to keep in the back of your mind as this tale unwinds. I guess you could say I'm a happy slave to science but a curious skeptic all around. For all of my life I have believed wholeheartedly that if I wanted the cosmos explained, it was best to find the explanations myself. I always wanted proof. Irrefutable proof that could be measured and qualified.

Soon enough into my research, I had to throw out the old rulebook because some strange things began to happen. I would run an experiment fifty times in my lab and get the same results. But if I

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ran the exact experiment in the lab next door, the results changed. Then I heard about these guys in California, physicists in quantum mechanics. They ran a series of experiments using meditation in an attempt to lower the pH of water. Yes, you heard me. Meditation. But here are the facts: Four guys meditated on a canister of water and lowered its pH by one full degree. Just by the way, if your pH was lowered by one degree, you'd be dead. But then something interesting happened. When they performed the exact same experiment in another room, the results changed.

Okay, at first blush I thought they were a bunch of crackpots because I wasn't exactly spellbound by meditation or the pH in water. It was interesting but not mesmerizing. However, what had me nailed were two things. Duplicating the experiment in another space caused a measurable change in results. As I said, I had witnessed and experienced the same phenomena in my own work. And I was fascinated that the intentions of people merely meditating could bring about a chemical change in the water.

What did it mean? Well, it implied that space had memory and you could condition space. And that you could apply human intent and bring about physical change. It had monumental implications. It might just explain a lot of the inexplicable.

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You know the old story. A guy walks into a church and begs God for something. No answer. Another ten thousand people do the same thing. Another ten million. God is apparently busy with other matters and does not reply to them either. Here comes someone in need, just there to sweep the floor, too humble and meek to ask for a toothpick much less anything else, and **boom!** His secret prayers are answered. Why? Perhaps because the space was conditioned by the millions of petitions of others. All those pleas of desperation from those believers who had gone before him had left a memory in the space. **Please! Help me! Save me!** But here's what science can't answer. Why **him?**

Why him indeed? You see, before Grace, I never paid much attention to a lot of things. After Grace . . . well, let's just say, none of this could have happened without her. Grace and I are like infinitesimal pieces in the most complicated jigsaw puzzle there is and yet we found each other. Was this an accident? No. I can tell you this with certainty. The world holds more wonder and optimism than ever. Because of Grace, I'd say anything is possible. Seriously. Anything. I really would. And that's why I love her. But I'll let her give you the whole story.

Chapter One

Firecrackers

Everything Michael just told you is true, but you have to understand our lives in its whole context for this story to make any sense. What happened to us was so unexpected that I think it's worth understanding how we came together and why everything could only have happened as it did.

So let me take you back to the beginning and, for the moment, offer this singular thought. There are still a few pockets of the earth that transcend the realities of the modern world. To my complete astonishment, the Lowcountry of South Carolina is one of them. No one who knows the area would argue. Not every square inch of it is spiritually uplifting because it's got its commercial sprawl like all cities. But just minutes south of historic Charleston's ageless glories and the plastic outskirts of suburbia, the neon world of consumerism begins to melt away.

Soon, moving along on Savannah Highway, there is a small rise in the road. Rantowles Creek. The

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deep blue water is vast, shimmering like fields of sequins, their tiny edges catching flashes of the afternoon light. Every single time I passed over the tiny bridge I would literally gasp with surprise. It was so vibrant with life and naturally beautiful.

For the trillionth or so time, I wondered why I didn't sublet my carriage house in downtown Charleston, move out here and sink roots in this blue and green paradise. But as soon as I asked myself the question, the answer was on the tip of my tongue. The answer was simple. I was still in the game, running with the ball like my hair was on fire. Besides, I was still too urban. I mean, moving to Charleston had been a concession to my family after decades of living in and around New York, working for a luxury travel service that paid very little but took me everywhere I ever wanted to go: Cambodia, Chile, the Galápagos, Patagonia, Istanbul—dream it up, I can arrange it and you will travel like royalty. It was a niche business, but a very nice niche.

Eventually, I moved to the Lowcountry. I had been terrified to leave New York and in other ways just as terrified to stay. My family knew it, too. Truly there wasn't much happening in my personal life except the packing and unpacking of luggage. So as usual, my father decided to take the matter of my future into his own lovable hands.

He begged me to just try Charleston for a while, and after the big showdown, I finally caved. Here's how that happened.

He called me one morning and said, "You gonna be home tonight?"

I said, "Yeah? Who wants to know?"

"The FBI. Be home at seven and that's it. Don't ask no more questions."

So without any further hullabaloo, Big Al flew to New York and showed up that night with a sack of Chinese takeout. I opened the door to my apartment on lower Fifth Avenue and there he stood. Delighted to see the man who loved me more than anyone ever had, I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him with all my might. I was a main-lining daddy's girl and not apologetic in the least.

After a feast of hot-and-sour soup, steamed dumplings, Peking duck, pork lo mein, and a lot of chitchat, he stood up and read his fortune cookie aloud.

"'The Buddha sees Big Al's only daughter in Charleston living happily in a carriage house on Wentworth Street that her wonderful father already bought for an investment and will allow her to live in rent-free but she has to pay the utilities.' Humph! Well, what do you say about that, princess?"

What could I say? Even though I was an adult, I

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still loved the fact that my dad wanted to spoil me rotten. And that he missed me. The next day I called Eric Bomze, who owned the company I worked for, and who by coincidence had relocated to Charleston after opening another office in Atlanta. He said, Come to Charleston immediately. That was the end of the New York chapter of my life. I called a mover and began to pack.

To my surprise and delight, it turned out that Charleston had everything I thought I needed and more. Like New York, it had neighborhoods and corner stores. It was old but not decrepit. What it didn't have was snow, ice or, to date, terrorists.

It was little things that made me happy—frothy cappuccinos and the **New York Times** at my fingertips. I loved chamber music and theater. Salsa dancing, tennis and biking. Restaurants and shopping. Charleston had that and lots more, and best of all, I could walk to work. And once Michael became my “other,” he could be at the Medical University in five minutes. We didn't pay a fortune to park or live on **gridlock alert** during the holiday season. So living downtown was the perfect decision for us.

We couldn't be bothered with a house and a yard. And I hated to admit it, but a suburban house would have destroyed our relationship in about two days. It wasn't about who was going to

cut the grass or clean out the garage. No, it was fastidiously manicured neighborhoods with married couples having block parties, backyard barbecues with coordinated paper products, children, dogs and bicycles strewn helter-skelter like randomly placed garden sculpture. That whole scene had the malodorous quality of long-term commitment. The **M** word. Like cheap chocolate—it looked good, but ultimately it made your teeth hurt. Marriage was not for me. Or Michael.

We didn't want to live among a sliding-scale population of predictable failures. Like stick-figure couples in a PowerPoint presentation, diminishing with each screen until over half of them disappeared by the end. We were together because we wanted to be together, not because we were stuck under the heel of a legal agreement, the guilt of custody and every kind of social convention you can name: country-club memberships, religious affiliations, shared bank accounts—the list of entanglements was endless. We shunned them all. I mean, it was great for some people but not for us. It wasn't who we were.

The only reason I bring this up at all is that I was en route to Hilton Head to visit my entire family for the Fourth of July holidays. I loved them like mad, but every visit to their new home was like the Spanish Inquisition—Italian style. This

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trip would be no different from all the others. They just couldn't help themselves.

It was a relief to pass the last red traffic signal that would crop up in the next hour or so because even though it was four in the afternoon, the heat was still eating me alive. I could taste salt in the beads of perspiration that tickled my upper lip. Taking a long swig of water from the sweaty lukewarm bottle in my cup holder, I decided it probably hadn't been the best idea to make the trip with the top down. But I loved summer and the rushing warm wind on my face and arms. Being a little on the other side of thirty, I bought into sunscreen and its merits. But any way you sliced it, getting older was a drag.

I inhaled the facts of life deeply and exhaled the reality that you really couldn't have it both ways. Balance was everything. If I wanted to be with Michael, it was best to keep things as they were. And **how things were** was pretty fantastic most days. Besides, I wasn't certain that I really wanted children. Let's be honest here. From the practical side, it would have meant giving up my career because I traveled all the time. Or I would have been forced to change industries and start all over again.

I wasn't willing to gamble the salary cut that

might come with an industry switch. And even if the mortgage was covered by my father, I still had bills to pay: groceries, utilities, clothes, cell phone, whatever . . . Besides, I wasn't bohemian enough to have children out of wedlock or brave enough to face the possibility that I might wind up raising them myself. Alone. Me, alone with a kid? And truly, illegitimate children would have put my parents in their grave. For sure.

I envisioned calling Connie and Big Al and telling them they had a new precious bastard grandchild. My father would have cut out his own heart and FedExed it to me. My mother would have swallowed every sleeping pill in CVS, washing them down with Pellegrino—wait! No! Not Pellegrino—she never would have wasted the money on something so frivolous. Tap water. She would've used tap water. And she definitely would have left behind a soggy, smeared epistle, drenched in her tears, apologizing for not teaching me better morals. And Nonna? My grandmother? The queen of Naples, Italy? Don't ask. No. Rock stars acquired children in that unseemly manner, naming them after food groups, not the Russos of Bloomfield, New Jersey, whose great-grandfather played bocce with Mussolini when he visited Naples. And now that my parents were nicely settled in the posh

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environs of Hilton Head, with nice friends and a membership to two golf clubs, a book club and a bridge club? Nope. Not happening.

“Oh, fine,” I said aloud, and changed the radio station.

As I passed each stretch of forest that thumped with the ghostly heartbeats of soldiers long gone to glory, honestly, I could feel my chest constrict. The minute I got there they would start asking questions, implying I was wasting my life, telling me how shallow I was. But in a nice way, of course.

Look, some of the details in my bio might help you understand my case. As you know, I’m Italian Catholic, now a ripened thirty-two and, as you know, God help us, the only daughter and unmarried. If that wasn’t enough, Michael, the one true and only love of my entire life, is unfortunately Irish. He insisted his red hair was actually more blond and that his freckled nose was merely sun-kissed, but for my family’s money, he was as Irish as Paddy’s pig, even though they had never laid eyes on him. Worse, as my parents would say, he fell away from **the One True Church**. He’s basically an agnostic.

I mean, he had never come right out and declared himself to be an agnostic or an atheist, but I knew Michael inside and out. He doesn’t want to support the Vatican machine and he thought science

would eventually explain everything. He might be right. He might just be right. Or not.

All I know is this. From the first moment I met Michael Higgins I knew I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. Okay, I didn't really know that. But I knew there was a high probability that my sheets were in his future and that I would work every last trick in my female toolbox to get some kind of serious relationship going. On sight, it was that intense.

My boss invited me to his annual Labor Day outdoor barbecue, right? I remember that I really didn't want to go because it was hot in a totally surreal way. Boiling oil. Mosquitoes the size of small birds. Flying jaws. Hurricanes looming off the coast. But we're talking Charleston in August, so what else was new? Think handsome men with golf tans, drinking gin and tonics, wearing long trousers printed with little whales and no socks. Women in pink floral sundresses, Lilly or Liberty, sipping frosted stems of Prosecco, toned arms and bony décolleté glistening in their marinade of perfume and glow. All the while an ancient man in a starched linen jacket refilled drinks at a makeshift bar in the brick courtyard and his companion moved in the background in a waltz of service, through the throng, offering pickled shrimp speared with little toothpicks. At the other end of

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the garden, on an oversize grill, skewers of pork, chicken, onions and pineapple sizzled, filling the air with glorious, mouthwatering fragrances. They would be served from the buffet over steamed rice, with salad and rolls. It was Lowcountry civility and propriety in tandem and completely irresistible.

Anyway, there was Michael leaning over the banister of the veranda, surveying the crowd, and I caught his eye. He was wearing a cream-colored linen jacket over a navy T-shirt with navy lightweight gabardine trousers. By coincidence, so was I. But my navy T-shirt was actually a camisole and my jacket hung from the crook of my finger over my shoulder. I gave him a small smile and a slight nod.

Just to clarify the varying degrees of “small smile and slight nod” and what they meant, this one meant **The drawbridge is lowered. You may approach.** At the far end of the spectrum, there was the jaw-dropper, in which your face was agog and you looked like a total ass with zero odds to recoup your cool. And at the opposite end there’s the vacant stare as your eyes slide elsewhere that says **Don’t even think about it.** Well seasoned in reading social signals, the smiling and self-assured Michael came down from the porch and made his way to my side.

“Don’t I know you from someplace?” he said.

“Good grief. Is that the best you can do?” I said. And I fell like a fool into the endless blue of his eyes.

“Do you want to live together? My apartment is over-air-conditioned,” he said with a grin and dimples that were beyond adorable and irresistible. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his keys. “It’s freezing there.”

“So is my place, and you’re pretty optimistic,” I said. “Shouldn’t we start with something like, I don’t know, **dinner**?”

“I don’t know. Sure. Hey, do you like baseball?”

“What red-blooded American doesn’t?”

“Well, want to come see me play?”

“What’s up with you and baseball? You play for the Yankees?”

“No, no. I play for the MUSC team to benefit the terminal patients in the children’s wing. My friend Larry works there with critical-care kids. Got me involved.”

Well, that stopped me in my lustful tracks. I mean, any man eager to play ball for a good cause in that heat had to be a great guy. I looked at him and said, “Sure. I’d love to.”

What ensued over the next few weeks were many baseball games, too many romantic fattening din-

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ners, lots of sweaty hooking-up and me holding out on the deed. Rule one: If you want a man to take you seriously, keep your britches on. Besides, there were so many things about him I didn't know. Like, was he a pathological liar? A philanderer? In huge debt? Did he have a drinking problem? An ex-wife with anger issues? Twenty children? A drug problem?

Did any of these things matter? Not really. No, they didn't really matter at all because for the first time in my life I was dumbstruck, absolutely flattened by the stupefying, powerful all-consuming feelings I had for a member of the opposite sex.

Eventually our bloomers hit the floor and I gave him keys. He put his stuff in storage and moved in. I had never been as happy as I was then, and in my head I was doing the hippie dance of stoned-out love every waking minute. Ah, yes, life was pretty darn near perfection in the domestic arena. Until I talked to my mother or my father or any member of the clan. Little by little my parents wheedled the facts about Michael from me. They were aghast that he was Irish, but the fact that he was doing stem-cell research in a project to repair heart-wall muscle sent them over the moon. He became **the Irish Baby Butcher**.

What happened over the next ten months was this widening of the distance between us and them.

They didn't even know him. They had never even met him. Worse, they were always putting me in these awkward positions to choose them over Michael. I was left to manipulate the situation with Michael so that he wouldn't notice that I always capitulated to my parents. But that didn't mean I didn't try to resist or that I didn't resent my folks. And I'd tell you this, my parents were wearing me out.

For example, I'd had no intention of driving to Hilton Head for this holiday until Mom called.

"Big Al is digging up the front walkway again," she whispered. "Did I ask for a new walkway with a nonskid surface of some revolutionary composite material?"

"Probably not, but I'm just guessing. Why are you whispering?"

"Because I don't want Nonna to hear me! Did I ask for a team of Mexican gentlemen to show up at six this morning and start jackhammering to wake up the entire world? Because if I did ask, I have no recollection..."

"What do you want **me** to do, Mom?"

"Talk to him, Grace. He doesn't listen to me! I have my ladies' club coming here next Thursday and..."

The front walkway was once again experiencing some unsolicited renovation that I was sure basi-

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cally left the front yard a mud hole. For the sixth time in three years. I had to agree with my mother; it was a little much.

“How are the members of my bridge club supposed to navigate the planks of wood, wobbling on sinking bricks? Should I bring them in through the garage like cases of paper towels from Sam’s Club?”

“You want me to come for the Fourth?”

A deep sigh from the Grand Canyon of my mother’s despair followed and I could imagine her curtains billowing and then settling from the g-force of her breath.

“You’re always welcome, Grace. And your brother is coming with his family. It would be so nice to have my family all together one more time before I . . . you know . . . die.”

You’re always welcome, Grace. That was Connie-speak for You’re welcome, not your boyfriend; it’s a family weekend; he’s not family.

“You’re not even sixty, Ma. Bad news, you’re not going anywhere for, um, I don’t know, thirty or forty years?”

“You never know, Grace!” Another huge sigh. “It’s in God’s good hands.”

So that’s a snapshot of my mother and what she’s like. Helpless. All my life it irritated me that my mother could never stand up to her mother or

to my father. Good grief! Old Connie had been a loyal and dutiful wife for a million years and had produced three reasonably successful children who were educated and self-supporting with the tiny exception of my mortgage and my stupid brother Nicky. But even Nicky was actually doing okay—at least he had never been in rehab or arrested for anything. Sometimes, and especially with family, it was just best to just, ah well, lower your standards of judgment.

My parents were some duo. Connie and Big Al. Big Al was my dad's well-deserved nickname. A booming voice, emphatic opinions on everything from the cost of gasoline to the amount of garlic in the shrimp scampi, Big Al gave highly quotable commentary that usually came across as, well, slightly naive and, let's spell it out, a little bit gauche. Big Al bellowed the final word, Nonna agreed with every syllable he spoke, and my poor mother cowered, sneaking to her bedroom to call me, looking for an ally or just a few moments to vent to a sympathetic ear.

I reminded myself all the time that Big Al meant well. His brand of politics and his crazy work ethic had kept us way beyond solvent, but he was never going to be the American ambassador to France, if you get my drift. Never mind that the BMW I drove, the house I lived in and the diamond studs

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in my ears were all spontaneous gifts from Big Al's generous heart. Okay, he still paid the mortgage and held the title, but that was how he held on to me.

On the other hand, that generosity produced another kind of emotional sand trap. You see, he bought Mom one-carat diamond studs for her birthday. That would be one-half carat for each ear—I mean, Al's successful, but he's not Donald Trump, okay? At the same time he bought me diamond studs of the same quality that were one-third of a carat each, because I have an extra hole in my right ear. Mom's face fell when Dad slid the little velvet box toward me at Mom's birthday dinner, and it was obvious that the thrill of the moment had been diluted for her. Same thing happened when Dad bought my convertible. He bought Mom a BMW sedan. She wanted to know if he thought she was too old to drive a convertible. Big Al couldn't understand Mom's edgy resentment, but I am sure some shrink would have had a ball with it. I didn't really blame her for her ambivalence about these double-edged swords of gratuitous gifting. Anyway, there's probably a pill that could help her, but that would be the last thing I would suggest to anybody.

“I'll see you for the Fourth,” I said.

You know how you always wish that you came

from the perfect family? That they were wealthy, classy and smart, but never pretentious? That they were all good-looking, stylish, funny and never cruel? Well, keep wishing, right? There was no Ralph Lauren ad layout waiting for me to step in on Hilton Head.

It was about six in the evening when I arrived at my parents' home and steam was still rising from the grass. We're talking ridiculous steaming Tennessee Williams–Somerset Maugham kind of heat. I pulled my duffel bag from the trunk and looked at the house. Mom was right. Dad's little construction project looked terrible.

Here's a little more on him: Big Al was supposed to be retired and he relocated the family to Hilton Head for the multitude of golf courses. He loved golf so much you would've thought his father had run the PGA and that he had caddied for Arnold Palmer or somebody. For years he talked nonstop about Hilton Head, the weather, the blue skies and the various challenges of each course, one more fantastic than the next. But to be perfectly honest, in a little over a year he got sick of golf and then there was the problem of Nicky. My little brother, Nicky, is a handsome devil, but he's not exactly Albert Einstein. It took him eight years to graduate from Caldwell College in New Jersey with an associate's degree in communication. Most people

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would be a doctor after eight years in college. Not my brother. He has a degree in skirt.

Anyway, true to his amazing nature, Big Al opened his second business so that Nicky could have a career and something to inherit someday. In New Jersey, Dad was in the paving business, mostly parking lots. In Hilton Head, he called himself a hard-scaper, which still entailed the pouring of asphalt from time to time. It was actually more gentrified, as they did work with all sorts of new materials that resembled that which they weren't. Cement that looked like bluestone, cement that looked like sandstone, et cetera.

You had to love my father. Everyone did. And I had always been his favorite. Until the advent of Michael. Maybe he couldn't stand the thought of his little girl having a man and a sex life. Maybe he was jealous. Or maybe he was just old-fashioned and didn't approve of his daughter sharing a home with a man without the benefit of marriage. I knew the fact that Michael was Irish didn't help. Anyway, life delivered Big Al and me to a Mexican standoff. It was stupid because everyone was entitled to live their lives the way they wanted to, weren't they? No. The truth is that you could, but there were consequences and the Big Chill from Al's corner was mine. I thought I had compromised by agreeing to live nearby in Charleston. We

could see each other often enough and I could still live my life. But the fact of the matter was that I could have been living in Patagonia and if Connie yelped I would've jumped on a plane. The familial choke chain had no respect for distance.

In this case, Mom was right. The front yard was an archaeological dig. If that wasn't bad enough, red, white and blue bunting was draped across the garage doors and a municipal-building-size American flag hung from a flagpole in the front yard. Over the flag of Italy, of course. It was just too much for anyone's definition of normalcy.

The New Jersey plates on my sister-in-law's minivan announced Frank and Regina's arrival with their trio of thugs-in-training. Nicky would be there with his insipid girlfriend, Marianne, the pre-K substitute teacher who never got called in for work and who spoke to my brother in her five-year-old's voice all the time. I braced myself and chose the garage entrance over the muddy bricks and planks. This was going to be some weekend.

I opened the door to the mudroom and entered the kitchen. Fresh pasta hung from the handles of every mop and broom in the house and every ladder-back chair. Nonna's marinara sauce (which she called gravy) simmered in a large cast-iron kettle, and truly the room did smell like a warm and heavenly afternoon on Mulberry Street. I don't

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know why it irked me that we couldn't serve just hamburgers on the Fourth of July like everyone else. Tomorrow my family would have spaghetti with meatballs and braciole, antipasto, sopressata, mozzarella and tomatoes with basil oil, a half-dozen baguettes dipped in this and that, and **then** we would have hamburgers, hot dogs, corn on the cob and more pasta, macaroni salad. With pickles. Don't forget the pickles. After every last person would moan from the excess of it all, the men would fall asleep on the sofas, the children would make themselves scarce, and the women would clean up so we could do it all over again in a few hours.

The television was blaring, and sure enough, Nonna was positioned in Big Al's La-Z-Boy recliner crocheting at fifty miles an hour. I called out to her, knowing she was fully absorbed in her soap operas and had not heard me come in. She is as deaf as a doornail, but don't say I said so.

"Nonna! It's me! Grace!"

"What? Oh! Maria Graziana! Thank God you're home safe! **Vieni qua!** Help me up!" I gave her a kiss on her cheek and helped her to her feet. "**Oh, Madonna!** My knees are killing me. **Avecchiaia,** old age—that's just how it is. Now let me look at you!" Her milky eyes that streamed water traveled from my head to my toes and she said, "Humph! Too skinny!"

“Oh, Nonna!” I gave her a big hug and I could feel her smiling. “What are you making?”

“What? Oh! Oh, I’m just put the finishing touches on the cover for the extra roll of toilet paper for the powder room. See? It’s the Capitol building!”

“Wow! It’s great! Someday you’re gonna have to teach me how to do this, you know.”

“Well, you’d better hurry up. Madonna!” she said again, and blessed herself. “I could go any minute.” We exchanged looks and then smiled at each other, the knowing smile with which we acknowledged each other’s white lies.

“Nonna, you’ve been threatening to die since I can remember. You **and** Mom.”

“Humph,” she said, handing me her masterpiece. “Go put this where she belongs. I have to check my gravy. Everyone’s out by the pool, running around in this heat!”

“Okay.”

With her hand in the small of her back, Nonna toddled off in the direction of the kitchen, waddling her generous proportions from side to side as she walked, which I thought was probably brought on by some arthritis. I examined her work. Indeed, it was the Capitol building. No doubt the toilet seat had Paul Revere or something like him crocheted in three-dimensional relief. Mom never

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complained about the Santa tissue-box covers Nonna made for every Christmas or the lilies she crocheted for Easter. She never complimented her either. But she did have an issue with the toilet-lid covers.

If you put them on the back of the lid, the lid flopped forward. If you put them on the front of the lid, the lid flopped forward. When my mother voiced a squeak of concern over the possibility of one of her grandsons losing his manhood in a slamming accident, Big Al read her the riot act. “Connie! ’Ey! Come on! This is art!”

It wasn’t art and we all knew it, but just like parents who enthusiastically hang their children’s artwork all over the refrigerator, my mother, with some reluctance, displayed the entirety of Nonna’s yarn creations with pride, albeit a worrisome pride.

I put the Capitol building cover over Mom’s extra roll, inspected the American flag on the lid and the fireworks on the tissue box, and had a flash that the fireworks would actually have been pretty cool if she had used a yarn with a little shine. Then I asked myself if I was losing my mind and went to my room to change clothes.

Like the rest of the house, my room was moved in its entirety to Hilton Head with a few choice additions from the Vatican gift shop—a holy-water

font over the light switch by the door, a large white glow-in-the-dark crucifix over the bed, a small statue of the Holy Family on the bedside table and a statue of my patron saint, Maria Goretti, on the chest of drawers. No doubt there was a scapular pinned to the mattress to thwart dreams of anything not approved by the Church.

I realized that until I got married, and perhaps until I produced a pack of children, Mom was determined that my bedroom would remain exactly as it was because, who knew? I might come home again. Simply put, my life in Charleston wasn't real to them. And frankly Mom's life in Hilton Head wasn't real to her because she desperately missed her friends and her sister in New Jersey.

I ran my hand over the fading flowers of my upholstered headboard and all of a sudden I felt sorry for my mother. In my life I went a million miles an hour trying to get what I wanted and to enjoy every minute of it. Had my mother ever had that chance? Did she have what she wanted?

I threw on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and went outside to say hello.

"Turn the gravy!" Nonna called out as I passed through the living room.

"Sure thing!" I called back as I sailed into the kitchen.

As I stirred I stared through the sliding-glass

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doors. There on the terrace was my brother Nicky with his hand cupping Marianne's southern cheek. My mother, Connie, was taking pictures of Frank and Regina's baby, Paulie, belly flopping into the pool. Big Al, arms waving, was talking to Frank and Regina. And although the shank of the day's tanning rays had disappeared, their Lisa, who couldn't be a day over twelve, was lounging like a movie star in her bikini reading **Teen People**. Tony, their oldest at fourteen, was sneaking a cigarette behind the grill.

I slid the heavy door to the left and called out, "Hello, fam! I'm home!"