

I Didn't Know She Was Married

Story Three

By Misha

The morning Jack and Erica arrived in Venice there wasn't a cloud in the sky. They were greeted instead by the melodic bells of St. Mark's Cathedral and a wiry dockworker named Raphael. Jack and Erica watched the earnest man secure the lines. Dressed in a faded tee shirt and jeans worn white at the stress points, Raphael grabbed hold of the heavy metal chain that would secure "At Last" for the next several days. He deftly anchored the yacht to massive iron posts that had long ago welcomed an array of marauding pirates to its shores. Today, however, the sleek vessel was safely nestled between a workaday fishing boat and an ornately decorated gondola.

The job completed, Raphael smiled broadly and raised his thumb to acknowledge his admiring audience. A ray of sunlight washed over the man's deeply lined face. Though his skin was the texture of shoe leather, Raphael's sinewy muscles and thatch of curly black hair created an alluring portrait of a man still in his prime. He reached out his large hand to meet Jack's, proudly welcoming the foreigner to his hometown. Displaying the chivalrous nature that was indigenous to his culture, he politely stepped aside to allow Jack to escort his bride ashore. Her elegant form starkly contrasted with the tired facade of a dock well-worn from centuries of seasonal floods. Just as the pair stepped off the oak plank, a dark-haired little boy careened into them, almost knocking Erica to the ground.

"Scuzi" the lad said absentmindedly, his charcoal-colored eyes trained on Raphael. The boy looked up at Erica's face and was instantly mesmerized. "I, uhmea culpa."

Erica nodded, acknowledging the boy's apology as she focused on regaining her footing, relieved that her light brown sandals had not sustained permanent injury.

"Erica, are you alright?" Jack asked, concerned. He was about to admonish the child for not watching where he was going when the eight-year-old darted onto their yacht.

"Popi! Popi!" the boy shouted.

"Gio, what is it? What has got you so excited at this hour?"

"Senore Demano. He just called Sophia. Fredrico is sick so I'm going to be the goalkeeper for the game this afternoon. Can you come? Please, Popi, you've got to come."

“Gio, it’s such short notice. I don’t know if I can get away at the last minute. Paolo has the day off already and there’s so much work to be done.”

“Please, Popi. I promise I’ll help you clean the boats tonight when they dock.” Raphael looked at his young son’s hopeful gaze. “Okay, I’ll be there. But that means I won’t be able to escort our new guests to the Panetteria for breakfast. Giovanni?”

Immediately, the youngster affected a businesslike demeanor, broadly gesturing toward his family’s eating establishment. “Por favore, if you’ll follow me” Gio solemnly instructed, without the slightest trace of the little boy they had witnessed just moments ago. Jack and Erica exchanged amused looks.

“Absolutely. Thank you, Raphael, for leaving us in such capable hands” Jack offered, with a knowing wink.

“You’re quite welcome, Mr. Montgomery. Giovanni is such a blessing to our family” Raphael responded, flashing a conspiratorial grin in his new friend’s direction. “Now, go” the man said, turning his attention back to his young son. “Your sister is expecting Mr. Montgomery and Ms. Kane.”

As the threesome made their way through St. Mark’s square, Gio stopped periodically to point out some of the well-known landmarks. “And this is the Doges Palace” Gio enthused identifying a sprawling gothic structure. “Do you see the Lion statue on the balcony and again, over there on the tower? He is the mascot of Venezia—or as you Americans call it, Venice. My soccer team, we are Lions too” Gio announced proudly.

“Oh, and I bet you are a fierce player, Giovanni” Erica said to the delight of her tour guide.

“I do my best. Popi taught me that if I play with my heart, my feet will follow.”

“Your father is a smart man” Erica replied, tousling the boy’s dark brown locks.

“He’s also very strong. I think he is the strongest man in the world. And he is very, very brave. Last year, he spotted an overturned boat in the river. He dove right in and saved two people from drowning. The town gave him a medal and wrote a long story about him in the newspaper.”

“What a lucky boy you are to have such a special man as your father.” Gio nodded in agreement and privately determined that Erica was just about the most beautiful lady he had ever seen. The youngster was not alone in his assessment. For the umpteenth time that day, Jack was thanking the Gods for making this magnificent woman his wife. Just as he was about to reach down to take her hand, Gio stepped between them and beat Jack to the punch.

“Come, we are running late. If we don’t hurry, all of the lemon biscotti will be gone.” He began walking quickly, lightly tugging Erica along. Jack followed closely behind the two, silently envying his young rival. You may have her now, Jack thought to himself, but she’s mine forever.

Two minutes later, the trio stood in front of the gleaming glass counter of Raphael’s family-run pastry shop. Sumptuous cakes and cookies filled the display case, made even more irresistible by the intoxicating aroma of cappuccino and espresso wafting in the air. After making their selection, Jack and Erica made their way to a quiet little table in the corner. Gio glanced longingly in Erica’s direction and then disappeared into the kitchen.

“I think Gio’s fallen under your spell” Jack said, taking his wife’s hands in his and bringing it to his lips. “Can’t say I argue with his taste.”

“Don’t worry” Erica said smiling. “As charming as he is—and he is a charmer—I think I’ll stick with you.”

“Glad to hear it, though that’s hardly the rousing endorsement I was hoping for” Jack replied, feigning hurt. “Maybe after breakfast we can head back to the yacht and I can show you all over again why I’m the only man for you.”

“Oh, you were pretty convincing last night. And this morning’s refresher left no doubt—”

“—Just the same, Mrs. Montgomery. I think if I put my, ahem, mind to it, I’m sure I can figure out new ways of making my point.” Erica laughed gently at the notion and reached provocatively for her glass of water. Before she was able to offer her thoughts on the matter, a stunning young woman came to their table bearing two cups of cappuccino and a simple white plate brimming with assorted biscotti.

“Gio thought you might like to sample a variety. I hope my brother’s not being too much of a pest.”

“Not at all. These look wonderful.” Erica reached for a piece that was sprinkled with powdered sugar and took a bite. “Mmm, and they taste even better” closing her eyes to savor the flavors.

“Let me have a bite.” Jack reached for her plate but Erica slapped his hand away.

“Get your own,” she said playfully. In explanation she added, “I’m sorry but he has a bad habit of trying to eat my food.”

“That’s only because I hate to see so many leftovers go to waste” Jack offered in his defense. “But fine, have it your way” he said and selected a biscotti studded

with almonds. From the rapturous look on his face, Erica could tell he had no buyer's regrets. "That is, without a doubt, the best biscotti I've ever tasted" Jack uttered between bites. "Raphael wasn't exaggerating when he said the Lafaccia Panetteria was the best bakery in Venice."

"Gratzi. The recipes were my great grandmother's. She and my great grandfather started the business in 1887. We still follow all the old traditions when we prepare them." Jack smiled politely at the young woman as he dipped what remained of his biscotti in his cappuccino. Suddenly, a deep blush colored her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm becoming even more of a nuisance than my brother."

"Don't be silly" Erica reassured her. "It's nice to see a family take pride in their work. But tell me. What is Giovanni's sister's name?"

"Officially I am Sofiana Renata Bendetta Lafaccia but my friends call me Sophia."

"Sophia. That's such a pretty name. Would it be alright if I called you that?"

"Oh yes, please do" the girl said eagerly. "And you too, Mr. Montgomery" she said turning to Jack.

"If I'm to call you Sophia, I insist that you call me Jack. And this beautiful woman is—"

"You are Erica Kane. I am a big fan of yours. Enchantment is my favorite perfume but I don't wear it when I work—only for special occasions" Sophia explained self-consciously and stole a quick glance at the wrought iron clock that hung on a nearby wall. "If you will excuse me, I must get back to the kitchen. Before you know it, lunch will be here and people will be expecting their frittatti. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Just as Sophia was about to push through the wooden doors, a small yet familiar hand pulled her through. "Isn't she perfect, Sophia? Even prettier than the pictures you have of her on your wall!"

"She is very nice, Gio but I think—"

"Think? Why must you think? The Laffacia's are about passion, Sophia, not reason."

Gio's sister could not help but smile. Her brother was a special little boy with a heart as big as all of Venice. Many times she wished that she could embrace life as fully as he did, even at his tender age. His infectious spirit made it all but impossible for her to speak clearly on the matter. "Passion is a wonderful thing, Gio, and love brings with it wonderful surprises. Your dreams will come true, if not this one, than the next. You will find her, Gio, of that I am sure." Although the

boy heard his sister's words of counsel, Gio knew deep in his soul that, in Erica, he had found magic.

When the Montgomerys returned to their cabin later that morning, there was a small package gaily wrapped in a pink ribbon addressed to Erica.

"Oh, Jack, another surprise? You're going to spoil me."

"Don't look at me. I hate to tell you this, sweetheart, but I had nothing to do with it."

Erica was more than a little surprised. "I don't understand. Jackson, if you didn't then—"

"I have no idea. Why don't you open it? Maybe it's a gift from the kids."

"You're probably right" Erica nodded and carefully removed the bow and peeked inside. Nestled below a puff of cotton was a silver coin embossed with Pope John Paul's profile. "Well, I can't speak for Greenlee, Reggie or Lily but this is definitely not from Kendall or Bianca."

"Oh, you can rule out Greenlee and Reggie. And unless I miss my guess, even Lily can be taken out of this equation. Honey, do you have any idea who could have sent this to you? Maybe someone you did business with in the past?"

"I can't think of anyone. Jack, what about Beppe or Dino? Maybe as a joke?"

"No. Remember I called them when we decided to stop off in Italy? Those two are still off on their mission of self-discovery in Kashmir."

Erica nodded.

"What about Myrtle or Opal?"

"No, neither one of them would give me something like this." Erica wracked her brain trying to come up with a feasible candidate. "I give up Jackson. I have absolutely no idea who might have left this for me. But I'll tell you; the thought of someone in our bedroom—"

"I know, sweetheart, I know. Listen, I don't like the thought of leaving you here alone."

"You're going somewhere?"

“No, we are. To find Raphael. Maybe he saw something.” Jack shrugged his shoulders in dismay. “I don’t know but I figure it’s worth a shot.”

About halfway up the pier, they spotted Raphael chatting with a fisherman but before Jack had an opportunity to inquire about the mysterious coin, Raphael asked Erica if she spotted the gift he left for her earlier that morning.

“You left that?” Jack asked.

“Yes, why? Was there a problem?”

“No, no problem. I’m just a little surprised. I just didn’t expect you to-”

“Pardone. I believe you misunderstand. The gift. It was not from me. When I dropped by the boat master’s office, I noticed it had been left there for Ms. Kane. Since I didn’t know when you might return, I dropped it off as a courtesy.” Raphael noticed two blank faces looking back at him and continued. “It is not unusual for packages to be delivered to the station from nearby shops. It is one of the many services we provide when you dock at the pier of St. Marks, similar to the front desk of a hotel.”

Jack nodded. “I should have known it was something like that. We were both just caught off-guard, since we weren’t expecting anything. Listen, Raphael, would the boat master have a record of who dropped off the gift?”

“Ah, I’m afraid you are out of luck. Normally, Paulo would be in the office but-”

“-he’s got the day off; I remember. Thanks, anyway, my friend. At least we know that no one was trespassing.”

“If I find out anything . . .” the man offered.

“I’d appreciate that. Oh, and by the way, the cappuccino at your Panetteria should be bottled and sold. The only thing better was the biscotti” Jack said, closing his eyes and savoring the memory.

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it.”

“It was wonderful, Raphael. And your daughter, Sophia is lovely” Erica chimed in. “You’re a very lucky man.”

“Indeed, I am.” The sudden horn from an incoming boat momentarily diverted Raphael’s attention. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m afraid I have-”

“Go. And thanks, Raphael. I appreciate you going out of your way to make this trip special for both of us” Jack said, lightly kissing Erica on the cheek.

"If there's anything I can do, please do not hesitate to call" Raphael replied, shaking Jack's hand before heading in the direction of the approaching boat.

Lingering for a few minutes longer, Jack and Erica exchanged pleasantries with some of the local fishermen, before returning back to the yacht. There, Jack made good on his earlier promise to his wife, meticulously demonstrating his love for her. Though it was now just after noon, the honeymooners lazed about in bed, still reluctant to join the throngs of tired tourists already lined up for their late-day excursions. "So, if site-seeing is off the list, how, Mrs. Montgomery, do you want to spend the rest of your afternoon?"

"Well, at the risk of putting on another five pounds, I'd love to have a leisurely meal at a nearby cafe and just soak up the atmosphere."

"Food, huh?"

"Are you telling me that you're not hungry?" Erica asked surprised.

"Oh, I'm hungry all right, but it's not food I'm thinking about."

"Are you serious? We just . . ."

Jack looked over at Erica sheepishly. "What can I say? I'm a growing boy."

Erica glanced down at the amber duvet that covered the pair and without batting an eye, replied, "yes, well, I can see that you are." Jack looked back at his bride in mock horror. "Sorry, I couldn't resist." Biting her lip, she asked "tell me counselor, just exactly what is your . . . mouth set on?"

Jack laughed. He loved Erica's sophistication but it was her playfulness that really sent him over the edge. "Mmmm, to start with I'd like to nibble a bit more on your right lobe."

"What? You don't like my left lobe?" sniffed Erica.

"I adore your left lobe. Next to your right lobe, it's my all-time favorite."

"But?"

"But if I gave it the attention it so richly deserves, your face would be out of my line of vision. And while I love a good nibble as much as the next guy, I absolutely refuse to deprive myself the pleasure of watching you go into a frenzy from my oh-so-skilled touch."

"So, unlike, say, van Gogh, you refuse to allow me to suffer for your passions."

"I think that's a bit of a rough comparison," Jack protested, lightly pulling on one of her tendrils. "I said I wouldn't nibble on it just yet. I never mentioned anything about cutting it off."

"Well, I'm relieved to hear it. I've grown quite fond of my ear. I especially like it with these gorgeous new diamond earrings you surprised me with."

"Well, I couldn't very well accept your honeymoon gift without reciprocating with a gift of my own. And I must say, they do look spectacular on you."

"They do, don't they" Erica said, holding them up to catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror across the room. "I can't wait to show them off."

"You'll have plenty of time for that . . . later. For now, I'd like to get back to the business of those lobes of yours." Taking advantage of his full height, Jack stretched out to her and captured the delicate mound in his mouth. Ever so gently, he suckled the bit of flesh, keeping a light watch on Erica's face. Each pull elicited a tiny twitch followed by a small murmur of pleasure. Slowly he guided his tongue along the inner edges of her ear, tracing its peaks and valleys. Erica's eyes fluttered briefly as she anchored herself by grabbing hold of his hair. Jack's tour continued, in and around, up and down until the tiny murmurs became throaty moans. Unable to control her need for him, Erica released his mane and instead clasped her delicate hands to his back. To her delight, she felt a succession of muscles ripple beneath her touch. In response, Jack slid down the length of her body until he reached her abdomen. He stole a quick glance at her creamy white skin before he dotted her flesh with a circular trail of kisses, moving inward toward her naval. When at last he reached his destination, his tongue flickered on her tiny opening. Erica shivered in delight, her skin glistening beneath his touch. Conscious thought left her as she wrapped her legs around him, desperate to experience his powerful strength. Jackson strode to her beat and was soon enveloped by her love. Together they rode the waves of desire, until sheer exhaustion forced them to dock. Joyfully, they slipped into a midday slumber, entwined in each other's bodies.

At 2 PM, the ringing of the bells of St. Mark's once again roused them out of a restful sleep. With a self-satisfied smile on her face, Erica stretched her body to its full 61 inches. "I never had a more satisfying snack, Mr. Montgomery. I've definitely married a man of many appetites."

"I live to please, ma'am" Jack said, without the slightest trace of false modesty. "And, now that you've been ravished, I'm guessing you really do want to find that cafe. So, if it's food that you want, than it's food that you shall have," Jack said, lightly brushing his bride's nose with his own.

"I don't suppose we could find a 'come-as-you-are' place in this part of the city,

hmmm?"

Jack laughed. "I think the locals would frown on that sort of thing. And I'm not sure I'd be too thrilled sharing you that way myself. Besides, I thought for sure you'd want to show off that lacy little sundress you picked up on the way back to the yacht."

"It is exquisite."

"No, you're exquisite."

Erica beamed. Never in her wildest fantasies had she imagined that she could be so happy. Jack truly was the man of her dreams and the years of struggle they endured to get to this place only made the reward of their marriage that much sweeter.

Thirty minutes later, Jack and Erica were seated at a charming little cafe off the beaten path. As they waited for their meal, they lingered over a glass of sparkling water, spellbound by the local scene. A group of older men were engaged in a lively game of bocce. Every roll of the ball was evaluated by the players, eliciting either a triumphant shout or a groan of remorse. In the far corner of the square, a handful of women haggled with local vendors selling their produce for dinner later that evening. Tubs of flowers anchored the food stalls, their heady fragrance punctuating the air. Unexpectedly, a waiter appeared at the table and presented Erica with a single coral rose.

"For me?" a charmed Erica asked.

The waiter cleared his throat. "It comes with a message." The young man pulled a piece of paper from his apron and read, "You are more beautiful than sunlight. Please do me the great honor of being my guest this afternoon. I will expect you at 4 PM." The waiter handed the note to Erica. "There's also an address."

Erica looked at the note and then, just as quickly handed it to Jack. "What do you think this means?" she asked, obviously concerned.

"I have no idea, sweetheart. But what I do know is that you're not going anywhere near this place." Jack turned his attention to the waiter. "Who gave you this?"

"He didn't reveal his name to me but if you look quickly over my left shoulder, you may be able to steal a glimpse. I don't think he trusts me to deliver the message properly. He said that he would not be paid if the job did not go exactly as planned."

Jack glanced in the appointed direction in time to catch a quick flicker of movement. Just as swiftly, he bolted to his feet, determined to uncover his wife's secret admirer. A waiter's ill-timed cheese cart interrupted Jack's stride. He winced on contact, the unfortunate angle doing more than its share of damage. He hobbled back to his seat and, after regaining his breath, Jack turned his attention back to the ominous note.

"Sweetheart, how about you and I get out of this place and head over to the local constabulary? I don't like the idea that someone's following us."

"Don't you think you're overacting just a bit? The instructions seem harmless enough to me."

"If that's all there was to it, I'd agree with you, honey, but honestly, Erica, I'm beginning to wonder." A look of confusion colored his wife's face. "We've been having such a good time, I didn't want to ruin the mood. Since we had breakfast this morning, I've had this strange feeling that we're being watched. Or rather, you are." Jack covered Erica's hand with his own, as if the slight contact could protect her from harm.

"I wish you'd told me. You know how I feel about being kept in the dark."

"I know, sweetheart, but I didn't want you to worry. This is our honeymoon, after all, and I don't want anything to spoil it, for either one of us. So, how about we make a deal? From now on, I won't keep anything from you and you promise me that you won't leave my side, not even for a second."

Erica crossed her heart and raised her hand in affirmation. "I promise. Now, is there any way I can convince you to head over to—" taking the paper from Jack's hand—"Cardonna and Reficco" and see what this is all about?"

"Not a chance in the world. You, my dear, are not going anywhere near the place and since I'm not letting you out of my sight that leaves me out of the equation too. But, not to worry; I have an idea." Jack pulled out his cell phone and punched in a handful of numbers. He explained the situation to the person on the other end of the line and after a few long minutes of avid listening, felt the muscles in his jaw relax. Hanging up, he turned to Erica and smiled. "I think we have our man. Come on, we've got to get out of here. There's someplace we need to go." After leaving a handful of bills on the table, he pulled Erica's chair from the table and helped her to her feet.

"So, are you going to give me a hint as to where we're going or are you just going to drag me along?" Erica asked, trying to keep up with Jackson's fevered pace.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Jack said, slowing down. "I guess I'm just relieved to know what we're dealing with."

"Well, any time you want to fill me in . . . I'm all ears" Erica replied plaintively. Jack stopped in his tracks and stared into his wife's face. She returned his gaze, batting her eyelashes for effect. Despite himself, Jack let out a loud chuckle.

"Yeah, well, we can take care of that later. For now, though, we've got business to take care of."

"I'm not taking another step, Jackson Montgomery, until I know where it is we're going and why. I refuse to be a party to this little game you're playing."

"Oh, really?" Jack said, charmed by Erica's sudden obstinance. He considered picking her up and carrying her to their destination but decided he'd rather save his energy for later that evening. Besides, he reasoned, Erica had every right to know where they were headed. "Well, if you must know, we're about five blocks and, since this is Venice, about two bridges from our rendezvous point."

"Rendezvous? With whom?"

"With the guy that's been leaving you gifts and messages all day."

"You know who it is?" Erica asked, surprised. Jack nodded. "And just when were you planning on telling me? No, wait. Let me guess. You thought it would be amusing to just spring this person on me? Or are you planning on using me as a decoy so you can draw him out of hiding and go after him with your bare hands?"

Tickled by the thought, he bent down to steal a quick kiss. "My bare hands, huh? Sounds like you'd kind of enjoy old Jack using brute force to defend your honor."

Erica tried to suppress a smile but failed miserably. "Okay, so it has a certain appeal. But seriously Jack, I really want to know who is behind all of this."

"Come on, just play along with me for two minutes longer."

Erica rolled her eyes. "Fine, if it's that important to you. But I'm warning you, Jackson. If this thing backfires in any way—"

"It won't. Now come on. We're running late."

As the local church bells signaled 4 PM, Jack and Erica came to a stop behind an iron-linked fence. Jack leaned against it, pointing out a figure some distance away. "Over there, Erica. The one dressed in navy. He's the person behind all this . . ."

“Oh, Jack. You’re kidding? Gio?” Erica asked forlornly.

“I’m afraid so, honey. It seems even an eight-year-old isn’t immune to your charms.”

“Jack . . . oh, Jack. What . . . what should I do? How can I possibly let that sweet little boy down without breaking his heart?”

“You can’t sweetheart. I’ve afraid every little boy gets his heart broken sooner or later” Jack sighed. He thought back to his long ago crush on a certain Ms. Emge and the despair he felt when he learned she belonged to another. And then he remembered more recent times. “Just be gentle with him. Believe me, I know how hard it is to have Erica Kane turn you away” he said, dryly.

Erica gave him a swift elbow to the ribs. “That’s not funny, Jackson.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.” Rubbing his side, he continued. “Listen, the sooner you tell him, the sooner this whole thing’s over with. Besides, if I know our man Gio, he’ll channel all that frustration into his game. The other team doesn’t stand a chance.”

“You think so?”

“I do. Look, I’m going to wait here. It’ll be easier on him if I’m not around. No guy, no matter how young he is, likes being dumped in front of his competition.”

“Jackson Montgomery; victorious over an eight-year-old. You must be very proud of yourself,” Erica teased.

“Hey, after waiting 17 years and, what? Nine husbands? You’re damn right I’m proud. Give him another fifteen years, who knows what would happen? That’s one smooth kid.”

“You’re not so bad yourself. And I bet you were quite the charmer at his age too. A twinkle in your eye, that smile. You must have driven the little girls crazy.”

Jack laughed. “Yeah, but unfortunately, it was their big sisters I was interested in. Look” Jack said, motioning in the direction of the field. “He’s trying to find you. Go.”

“Wish me luck” Erica said as she opened the gate.

Gio spotted Erica just as the referee’s whistle blew. He grinned broadly and

waved before turning his attention to the game. Three times the opposition stormed his goal and three times he turned them away. As the Serpents approached for the fourth time, Erica heard a shout just behind her. "Difendere, Gio!" Raphael cheered. "Difendere!"

Swept up in the moment, Erica chimed in. "Defense, defense." Before the lead player could make his move, a horn blew signaling the end of the half. Gio came running off the field into his father's open arms.

"Popi, did you see? No goals!"

"I saw, Gio. You played proud."

"I am a LaFaccia. We are great warriors" he offered triumphantly and turned to face Erica. "I am honored that you came."

"How could I possibly refuse such a lovely invitation?"

"So, you got my flower?"

"I did. And I followed the directions in your note and tossed it into the fountain."

"You made a wish first, though, didn't you?"

"Yes. Gio, if you have a moment, I'd like to tell you what I wished for" Erica said, looking at Raphael for assurance.

"I'll be here if you need me, Gio. I love you, my son."

"I love you, too, Popi."

Erica and Gio sat on a nearby bench. "Gio" Erica started. "I want to thank you for my wonderful gifts. The flower was beautiful and the coin—"

"It is very special, like you. My Aunt Tereza gave it to me at Christmas. She said my mamma had one just like it when she was a little girl. Only hers had a picture of Pope John XXIII."

"Oh, Gio, I don't think I should keep this" Erica said and took the coin from her purse.

"No, I want you to have it. As a symbol of my devotion, to you and my faith" the boy said solemnly as he made the sign of the cross and uttered words of prayer.

"I appreciate it, really I do, but I must insist. A coin as special as this should remain in your family."

"Oh, but it will" Gio said earnestly.

"No, honey, I'm afraid that it won't. You see, sweetheart, there's been a bit of a misunderstanding between us."

"A misunderstanding?"

"Mmm, hmm. I'm afraid so. You see, Gio, I am already spoken for . . . Mr. Montgomery . . ." Erica struggled to find the right words.

"Mr. Montgomery is a very nice man. I like him a lot—" Gio's lips began to tremble.

"I like him a lot too. In fact, Gio, I . . . I love him." Erica took a deep breath and continued. "Do you know what I wished for when I tossed the flower into the fountain, Gio? I wished that whoever sent me the rose would find—"

"No, please. You mustn't say it. My popi, he's, he's." Gio started to sob.

"Gio, your popi?"

Gio wiped away a tear. "He has been alone so long. Too long. My mamma. She died when I was just a little boy. Ever since then, he has been very sad. I try to make him happy and so does my sister, Sophia but we are only children. He is a man and a man needs a woman's love. I know if you just give him a chance—"

"Give him? Gio, what are saying?"

"I want you to marry Popi. I know you can make him happy again. You're very beautiful, almost as beautiful as my mamma. Please. Please Ms. Kane. Make my dreams come true."

Erica didn't know what to say. Gio looked at her with such hope in his young eyes. How could she possibly find the words to make him understand?

Raphael looked over and saw that despite the smile fixed to her face, Erica was terribly shaken. What, he wondered, could have happened? He decided that perhaps he had been wrong to leave Gio and Erica to talk alone. As he walked toward the bench, his son ran into his arms. "Popi, I did it. This time I think I really did it. Sophia didn't believe I could but I knew immediately—"

"Slow down, Gio. What didn't Sophia believe?"

"That I could find you a wife. But she was wrong. Ms. Kane, she will be your wife.

And my new mamma.” Gio bent down and kissed Erica lightly on the cheek.

“Gio, I’m afraid that’s not possible” Raphael said, shaking his head. “Mr. Montgomery—”

“I will ask his permission. If he cares about Ms. Kane as much as she does, I’m sure he will approve” Gio said purposefully.

“I don’t think he will, Giovanni. You see, Mr. Montgomery is Ms. Kane’s husband.”

This time it was Gio’s turn to be surprised. “How, how is that possible? They have different last names. And, look. There is no ring on her finger.”

Erica cleared her throat. “I’m afraid it’s true, Gio. Mr. Montgomery is my husband and I love him very, very much. We have different last names but only for business.” She turned toward the fence and looked in Jack’s direction. “In my heart my name is Erica Montgomery. As for my ring, well, I’m afraid the food in your country is so good that it no longer fits. As soon as I get back to America, I’m going on a strict diet!”

To Erica’s great relief, Gio grinned. “Women! They are never skinny enough.” Slowly the grin faded as Giovanni turned serious, dramatically getting down on one knee. “Mrs. Montgomery” he began pointedly “I made a terrible mistake. I hope you can find your way to forgive me” and kissed her hand in apology.

“Oh, Gio. No forgiveness is necessary. But . . .” Erica paused, letting out a loud sigh as she placed her hands on her hips. “I am not skinny!”

There was a moment of silence and then Giovanni Vincenzo Lafaccia began to giggle. The sound became infectious and soon, Erica and Raphael were also overcome with laughter. As she tried to catch her breath, Erica felt Jack’s familiar touch.

“I trust everything’s okay?” he asked.

Pulling Jack’s arm around her waist, Erica nodded. “Everything’s better than okay, isn’t it Gio?”

The boy smiled shyly and then reached out his hand to Jack. “You are a very lucky man, Senore Montgomery.”

Before he had a chance to reply, the referee’s whistle blew signaling the start of the second half. Gio dutifully began making his way to the field when he suddenly stopped and turned toward his father. Sheepishly, he shrugged. “Sorry, Popi. I didn’t know she was married.”