

Chapter Fourteen

GRADUATION

*More than you know,
More than you know
Man o' my heart, I love you so...*

*Oh how I'd cry,
Oh how I'd cry,
If you got tired and said "goodbye"
More than I'd show,
More than you'd ever know*

—"More Than You Know"

Charlie's eyes were still swollen from the endless crying but he tried to sing songs in his head in order to keep his composure. Despite the mild weather this Sunday June afternoon, the sky was its traditional don't-give-a-shit gray and he could only hear the chorus from "More Than You Know" playing in his head. The song, a ballad from the show *Great Days*, aptly fit his sullen mood. Odd, when he first heard a jazz interpretation of the song he was struck by the vocalist's voice as it agonized against the lyrics. He and Joe heard it played over the radio late one night and Charlie was taken by the tender melody. He never dreamed it would have such meaning to him. It was a lover's lament,

written as a signature piece for a great show, but suddenly, the words in the chorus appropriately provided a direct reference to his father and how Charlie felt without him.

How horrible. What were to have been two of the most joyous occasions in the DePietro household were now two of the most depressing. A party had been planned—a gala event to celebrate the graduation ceremonies for family and friends, and even neighbors had been informally invited. All were anxious to come. Now all of them knew to stay away.

Although he was immersed in enormous grief, Charlie sat straight and proud in his stark white chair, just as his father had instructed him to do leading up to that graduation day. Eugene told him the event would be one of the proudest and most joyous moments of his life. "I'll wave," he told Charlie. "Look for me, I'll be sitting straight and proud, too!" Charlie couldn't bear to look in the direction of the family seating area as he waited for the schoolmaster to call his name. Accepting his junior high school diploma was suddenly a chore, not a celebration.

Only three days before, Eugene was to have attended a similar ceremony—Joe's high school graduation—where he would bear witness to the first member of his family to receive a high school diploma. That, too, had been hell.

As he kept reminding himself to stay erect in his chair—all he wanted to do was slump—Charlie pulled angrily on the coat sleeves of his store-bought suit. The cruelest of God's punishments was that Eugene had finished Joe's graduation outfit but was too ill to finish Charlie's. It was the first time his second son ever had to wear a suit, other than one made by Eugene, and though Charlie looked good in anything, he felt miserable in it. His father had been making a grand suit. Eugene had started the fittings shortly before Ida's birthday. But, with all his other tailoring tasks, he left it for the last minute, promising Charlie he would have it ready in plenty of time.

The night after Eugene's burial service, held in full regalia at the Masonic Temple, Charlie sat huddled on the cold floor in the tailor shop, holding his unfinished jacket in his lap. Wide looped threads barely held the seams together, leaving the coat for one more fitting before Eugene sewed the last stitches by hand. Charlie remembered how cheerful his father was the last time

he tried it on. He had stood still as his father circled around him, straightening the cloth across his shoulders, grabbing proudly at the lapels and yanking them until they lined up perfectly on Charlie's upper torso. Charlie smoothed the fabric, almost petting the jacket like it was a cherished pet. After a few moments, he balled it up and pulled it to his chest. He held it there a few moments and as he let it go, he slumped over, burying his face in it so his brothers wouldn't hear his sobs.

He couldn't believe his Pa was gone.

When he was all cried out, he sat motionless, staring at the tape measure strewn across the mannequin in the center of the shop, a headless figure who, like the Statue of Liberty, he thought, seemed to stand guard, protecting his father's goods.

He heard footsteps.

"Hey, my Carluch, let's hear some tunes, huh? Pa would want us to hear some tunes," Joe said, referring to the radio lying between their beds in the next room.

"I don't want no tunes, Joe-sep," Charlie muttered.

Joe moved quietly toward him and joined him on the floor. "But remember what Pa always said..."

"What?" Charlie managed.

"No matter what happens to either of you, you two will always have your music. And music feeds your soul..."

Then like a musical refrain, they looked at each other and said in unison, recalling their father's philosophizing, "*Aliment azinoni la Sua anima come un cannoli di cioccolato...*" They started to laugh.

Then, like a verse that naturally segues into the chorus, Charlie started to cry again, only harder.

"Come on Carluch," Joe said throwing his arm around him, "let's get musical, huh?"

"Yeah. Well, I don't feel so musical right now," he snapped.

Joe stood, then disappeared. Charlie could see only his silhouette in the darkness. Joe quickly returned, a violin and bow in each hand. Then softly, "Come on, Carluch, let's play, huh?"

Still sad, Charlie looked up, then finally reached out and took his instrument. The duo stood shoulder-to-shoulder. They turned to make eye contact as they had done so many times before. Then both heads rotated, and staring straight ahead at their reflections

in the cabinet windows, the two raised their chins proudly. Without hesitation, they took their violins gently, tucked them in the crook of their necks, pinched them together with a shoulder, and as if on cue, pulled the bows across the strings slowly, each boy playing his part. Though the tears intermittently soaked, then dried on Charlie's cheeks, he continued to play. The duo passionately played "The Poet and the Peasant," again and again, without stopping until the sun came up the next morning.

As Charlie sat tugging at the sleeve cuffs that dreary June morning on the playground, he remembered how he and Joe had played so tirelessly a few nights before. The next morning, Joe had taken all the money in the jar he had saved from his church job and bought Charlie a graduation suit at Woodruff's.

Though Joe was profoundly sad himself, he kept his focus on his sidekick, trying to cheer him up. At first, he offered to let Charlie wear his suit but both knew it wouldn't fit. As they briskly made the two-mile walk, Joe urged Charlie to talk—to recall all their favorite memories of their father. Reluctantly, Charlie opened up. The two also burst into song, singing several of Eugene's favorites, including "Yes, We Have No Bananas." When they reached the store, cleansed and restored from a final blast of *Aida*—singing all the parts in the finale—they picked out a suit.

Charlie pretended to like it.

As they reached the cash register both boys were thinking the same thing: It's nothing like Pa's suits. But they knew it would have to do. It was made of cheap muslin linen and had no lining. His father's summer suits were always lined with leftover pieces of silk; in the winter, cashmere. But Charlie would manage. Gallantly, they shoved each other's shoulders. "Hey," Joe declared, the unspoken meaning in his voice saying, "The suit looks good." Charlie responded with a "Hey!" in a slightly higher octave, indicating he was in the same key emotionally as his brother. This ritual went on for a verse or two, until they had convinced themselves. Truly, they were making the best of a bad situation.

To keep his mind off his sadness on the way back home, Joe prompted Charlie to sing along with him again, challenging him to transpose the keys and chords to Satchmo originals.

They belted louder than the thunder of the falls, when they got to "West End Blues." They scatted the tune all the way home. Both were still clearly in shock.

Francesca was too distraught, she said, to sit on the sidelines and watch both boys' graduation ceremonies, so she stayed at home. Mary gathered up her siblings, however, and each sat attentively with a little gift for each boy, gifts that she had hastily created from things she found around the house or helped her brother and sisters find. Joe got a block of goat's cheese from Mary, Ida had a pine cone wrapped in newspaper, Jennie had unwashed figs in a jar, Louie, a cigar he stole from Uncle Leone, and Charlie had saved up and picked out his own gift, a lead sheet for "Got A Date With An Angel," one of Joe's recent favorites.

When it came time for Charlie's big event, Mary gathered her entourage. She led the way, unrelentingly nudging to the best seats in the outdoor makeshift auditorium. The kids were euphoric that their big sister had snagged front row seats. When Charlie's name was called, the group jumped and cheered. He tossed them a shy and embarrassed smile. He had planned to surprise his father with his perfect marks, especially his A in English.

For gifts, Ida gave Charlie two peaches that she found on the ground at the house next door with Mary's help. Jennie gave him one of Mary's jars of tomatoes, Louie, a hankie that Mary snuck from her father's bureau, and Joe had sketched a portrait of Charlie playing his violin from charcoal-burned wood scraps scavenged from the bits in the family stove. Charlie just stared at it in amazement, then looked at Joe, who smiled back humbly. Charlie did his best not to break down. Instead, he shoved Joe's shoulder with a "Hey!" That familiar verbal signal—the same one a traffic cop uses to halt cars—in order to safely head off tears before they could proceed any further and make both boys collide into a symphony of sobs.

Charlie was overwhelmed at the extent of Mary's caring and ingenuity and at how carefully she made sure that Joe and Charlie felt remembered and special at their graduations. She was amazing, Charlie thought. She had the resolve and the energy of a legion of Christians fighting the Romans. The lions might

always be at her door, but undaunted she fought them all off, taking each of life's perils in can-do stride.

As Joe stood for his diploma, he walked with his signature sense of dignity. He strode deliberately up the stairs in one of Eugene's most beautiful creations, a smart taupe, lightweight gabardine suit, showing all 350 audience members his father's great legacy, one of his fine handmade goods. Joe looked rich and stylish, and in his mind he was, for he had a treasure to show off, one he would wear until it fell apart. It was his way of keeping his Pa safely wrapped around him. Joe understood that God took good people away, just like his little sister Adelina, so he had faith that Eugene was in a better place, but he was worried about Carluch. His little brother seemed to be taking their father's death exceptionally hard. His *compagno* had hardly eaten for days.

Joe shored himself up knowing he might be singled out to carry the weight of his family on his shoulders now. Though he wasn't sure what role his Uncle Leone would play, he hoped the crotchety and miserable son of a bitch would move away and find another job. But Joe was skeptical; Uncle Leone had grumpily stated after Eugene's funeral that the family was now his responsibility, as was the custom in the DePietro clan when the breadwinner disappeared or died. The entire household was on edge, not knowing if or how this newly-appointed patriarch would rule, for though he was often present at meal times, and he slept in the men's dormitory behind the shop, rather than settling in to join his relatives for evenings of family camaraderie he regularly joined friends and war buddies after work. He never had much to say, nor did he show interest in disciplining the children. When he took his place at the dinner table, he rarely spoke. He just soaked up his bread with marinara sauce and olive oil and watched the family fireworks go off.

Though he was grieving in his own dark and quiet place, Joe focused on nothing else in the days following the graduations except how he could help his younger siblings. Charlie was still silent and withdrawn, so Joe did everything he could to keep his spirits up. When he saw Charlie sitting on the porch staring straight ahead he coaxed him, sometimes ordered him, to practice the violin to the point of exhaustion, which caused Charlie

to collapse on his bed and conk out for a decent night's sleep. When he wasn't worn out from the playing, Joe turned on the radio and the two listened intently, catching up on all the latest jazz recordings. The duo was especially fascinated with the new big band sounds, and carefully analyzed the different parts each musician played. Later they tried to imitate certain phrases and chords on their violins. Sometimes Charlie gently sounded them out on his mother's piano.

Francesca, in all her glorious martyrdom, had dinner on the table after both graduation ceremonies but she sat silent, eating slowly and morosely, staring at Eugene's chair and saying nothing to her children. She was sure her life was over. Or, it might as well be, she thought from morning until night, for she had no one to fight with but Mary, and she would be lucky to stay in the house Eugene had built for her. Too, her dream of something bigger and better was futile. Who the hell would marry a forty-five-year-old overweight woman with six children? As custom had it, sometimes a widow married a brother of her deceased but not Francesca. She would rather bury herself alive on top of her husband's casket than forge a marital union with Leone. He was always in a foul mood, his temper vile, and she was sure he was furious that he had never married. She just hoped he wouldn't take out on her his frustrations at being forced to stand in his brother's shoes. Francesca had other worries, too. Leone was no tailor. She had no idea who would run the shop.

Mary was so inwardly hysterical over her father's demise she simply wandered around robotically. She moved even faster now, completing her chores, hoping that such distractions would minimize her grief. She was out of control, unable to come to terms with the reality of Eugene leaving her. She simply pretended he was going to magically show up at any moment. This was a defining moment in Mary's life; she harbored one fantasy after another just to keep herself mentally stable. She often talked cheerfully to him, out loud, imagining he was standing there. From the rest of the family's point of view, Mary was clearly crazy. Jennie and Ida were the only two who couldn't see it.

Joe had come to grips with the sudden reality that he wouldn't be attending school in New York. In fact, a high school diploma