



SHOW ME  
(HOW)  
TO  
LIVE

{A NOVEL}

ANDREW S. CIOFFI

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## **Show Me (How) To Live**

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Show Me (How) To Live is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events and occurrences are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious way. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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## ***In Memoriam***

And in your waiting hands I will land  
And roll out of my skin  
And in your final hours I will stand  
Ready to begin



**Chris Cornell, Audioslave**  
“Show Me How To Live”

## **With Honor and Admiration**

This story pays homage to the film *Ikiru*  
By Akira Kurosawa

## **Dedication**

To the many healthcare workers who deserve all the  
love and care this world has to give

## **Special Thanks**

To my family, especially my wife (a lovely nurse)

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## PROLOGUE

# THE DIAGNOSIS

“Mr. Bertone, there are options for treatment,”  
said the oncologist.

"Treatment?! You just told me I was dying of cancer. What kind of treatment do you have for that? Are you saying that I'm *not* gonna die now?"

"There are a number of options, Mr. Bertone. You have been diagnosed with stage three stomach cancer..."

"Yeah, I know."

"Which means that the chances for a complete cure are very slim because the cancer has spread to your liver and spleen. However, if we move quickly, and aggressively, we can extend your time."

"How long? You still haven't told me how long I've got."

"Well, typically we see patients live for two years with stage three gastric..."

"Two years. Jesus Christ..."

"With treatment, including partial gastrectomy..."

"Is that what it sounds like?"

"We would have to remove part of the stomach, yes. As well as your spleen and part of your liver..."

"Jesus Christ. And that's supposed to make me live longer?"

"I cannot guarantee..."

"What can you guarantee?"

"Well, Mr. Bertone, I can guarantee that I will remain as committed to your care as you and your family. And..."

"Yeah, my family," he said, under his breath

"...with a combination of chemotherapy and radiation, we may be able to shrink some of the other tissues."

"What does that mean in terms of time?"

"That could mean four years, maybe five."

"..."

"You are a strong man, Mr. Bertone. I would not normally recommend surgery at this stage, which is why I think if we act fast..."

"How fast?"

"Are you free on Thursday?"

It was the way he said it, like he was arranging for a tee time in the morning. For the first time since sitting in that chair, he broke, but it wasn't with tears. The two of them shared a smile, as if the whole thing were ridiculous.

"Laughter is good. Do you have questions about the procedure? Or the treatment? Or any other questions at all that I can answer?"

"I... Jesus Christ, I really don't know. I mean, I'm a Chef, what am I supposed to do without a stomach?"

"Well, I think you may need to hang the apron for a while, but with any luck, we'll get you back into the kitchen."

"Yeah..."

"I would be happy to answer any questions that you have, and I would be more than happy to meet with you and your family to discuss this."

"Thank you, doctor. That won't be necessary. I'll call them... Do I see them on the way out?"

"Yes. We already have an operating room reserved, but they will go over the details with you. If you need anything else, please do not hesitate to call."

"Thank you again, I guess."

"We will do everything we can, Mr. Bertone."

"Very reassuring... Alright then. So that's it?"

"Please give my best to your family. And please, anything you need..."

"Thank you, doctor. And, hey, doc, I'm sorry I called you that earlier..."

"Not at all, Mr. Bertone. Please take care, and I will see you in two days."

# CHAPTER ONE

## BLOOD, SWEAT, AND STAINED APRONS

**M**arco Bertone was just delivered his death sentence. He wanted what any man in his shoes would have wanted: to be with his family; to have someone to talk to; someone who was there for him; someone to feel sorry for him. However, that wasn't going to be easy. You see, he's neglected them. He's neglected them as much as he's neglected his health, if not more. That's not to say it was Marco's fault that he had cancer, but there were signs. The stomach pain and the burning, his loss of appetite, weight loss, the occasional vomiting... 'Just nerves,' he figured. He was under a lot of pressure and the divorce was taking its toll. Nerves or not, had he not ignored the signs, there may have been more that could have been done. And he's gone groveling back to his wife and daughter more than once, which never ended well for Marco. This was different, though. He was sure of it. He had a death sentence.



"Yeah, Maria please..."

"Can I ask who is calling?"

"Yeah, it's her husband, Lorraine. Can you tell her I need to talk to her? It's urgent."

"Hello, Mr. Bertone. Maria is with a patient now. Can I have her call you back?"

It was an insult that she didn't call him Chef. She didn't just forget.

"No, I'll wait. Can you put me on hold?"

"Are you sure, Mr. Bertone? I don't know how long she'll be, she just went in."

"No way you can interrupt her, huh?"

"She's asked that I not do so anymore, Mr. Bertone."

"I really need to speak with her, it's urgent."

"..."

"I'll hold."



It was always urgent when he called. He always had to make it a matter of life or death. Sometimes it was about money, other times it was a mood swing. Mostly it was whiskey, or jack and coke, sometimes it was just coke. That and the mistake with the waitress, and the one with one of the hostesses. The one with the hostess' roommate put him out of the house and facing down a long line of complicated

divorce proceedings. Even though his wife was on her way to becoming an established dentist, Marco had more to lose, fiscally speaking, and reputation-wise. He had already lost as much as he was willing to lose; he wasn't ready to sign over his restaurant. Marco was listening to the delightful sounds of some late seventies yacht rock getting ready to cry wolf. Only this time, there really was a wolf, and it was bearing down on him.



Marco Bertone was once the head chef and owner of *Marc*, which was the first Italian restaurant in Brooklyn to earn the coveted Three Star rating from the Michelin guide. It put the neighborhood, and Marco, back on the map. Immediately, he had lines out the door. Immediately, he was booking tables ten weeks in advance. He could charge the sky, and people would pay it to experience Marc's exquisite tasting tour of twenty-four small plates that made even the heads of the best Osterias in Italy come calling for a table. That was the start of his long and lonely descent. When he died, it was fallen from grace, and the Chef that lit the borough on fire was almost entirely forgotten. Almost.



A young Mr. Bertone, before he was called Chef, got his start washing plates that would become the canvas for Chef Bastiano Moretti's Michelin-rated cuisine. He walked in off the street one day with nothing more than the desire to be in the kitchen, the drive to wash as many dishes as it took to get behind the line, and the confidence to demand a chance. He even brought his own lunch. His hours were late and long,

and the work was hard and far from glorious. It helped to put food on the table, barely, while his then girlfriend attended Columbia Dental. She was always the smart one.

Marco and Maria loved each other very much, though they had very little, besides exceptionally clean teeth. She went to school during the day and had plenty of time to study at night while he was working. She was always with her flash cards. Even when they had time together - they would walk the city, have picnics in the park, and spend their days lost in the library - she would carry a deck of them. He didn't mind so much. In fact, he used to help her quiz them.

It took Marco three years to get himself a prep cook position, which was nearly unheard of in the culinary circle he was spinning. He started saving early on for his first proper Chef's knife. Walking to work, he always felt proud, and sort of afraid, to carry it. He didn't have a fancy roll to hold it, so he had to wrap it in a dish towel, but that's the way even some of the greatest got their start. By then Maria was graduated and interning, and she was starting to make a little more money. They talked of one day being successful, better off, and when they would be on the other side of the harder times.

Marco quickly progressed. He earned his spot on the line after eighteen months of cleaning mushrooms and slicing coppa. In just under five years, he had worked his way to the hot apps station on the lunch shift in one of New York's finest establishments. The world was his oyster, and the dentist would soon become his fiancé.

They had a storybook engagement, and their wedding was everything she ever dreamed it would be. They spent their honeymoon on the Amalfi coast, eating their way from beach to beach. Life was grand, and soon after, it was filled with a new love for their daughter Natalia.

But Marco's story up until then wasn't about how he became Natalia's valiant King, or Maria's shining knight. His was about grinding out service after service and blood, sweat, and stained aprons. His was about being swallowed up by the industry and trading precious moments for accolades. And his was ultimately about the drugs to get him through a hard service and the drink to get him over one.



"Mr. Bertone, thank you for holding. Dr. Lombardi will be with you in just a moment." She got her license before they married. She never took his last name, but then it made it sound like the divorce was finalized. At the very least, they were one step closer.

"This is ridiculous," he said, over the elevator music she was pumping through his mobile. "I've got to put up with this sh..."

"Marco, are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm, friggin', still here. Look..."

"Listen, Marco, I'm really busy. Can this wait?"

"No, it can't wait. I need to see you. And Nat should be there too."

"What is it, Marco," she sighed. "What could be so important?"

The news had come out within the last few months that Marc had lost a star. Two was still rarified air. When he first earned that rank, he was euphoric. When he earned it again, he was devastated. He'd been vulnerable, and he'd been in touch. They'd gone through this all already.

"Look, I just need to talk to you is all. It's really important. It can't wait."

"Marco, if this is about the divorce, it will have to wait. I'm not talking to you about any of this without my attorney..."

"It not about that, I need to see you. Something's changed..."

"Goodbye, Marco. I can't keep doing this."

"Don't hang up on me."

"Just tell me what's going on?"

"I can't. Not like this. It's got to be tonight. I can meet you both."

"Tonight's no good, Marco. I've got to go."



Marco had a hunger in him to prove all of them wrong - those critics, his wife, her lawyer, his investors. Himself. How could the executive chef of a three...two-star restaurant just hang his apron. His stomach was kneading and knotting, his teeth were clenched. Instead of heading home, or over to

Maria's to try to talk, he went straight to Marc and marched himself into the kitchen. By then, it was first seating and the place was packed.

Most of the tables were just getting into their wine, and the first plates were just singing out of the kitchen. He knew the timing of it all in his bones. It was his timing. People he hand-picked were delivering his food. "Chef," said one of the sommeliers. His mouth watered, but from the nausea and not the food. Every customer in the dining room knew who he was, and they tried to give a compliment or take a picture. He wanted nothing to do with them. His hair was full of sweat before he stepped behind the line.

He pushed past the Chef's table, which was in the kitchen, which was walled off from the main dining room. He wanted his guests immersed in their experience, but a chef of his stature needed to be seen by his people. It was a good compromise, and it was the best seat in the house, and the hardest to land. Those two were in for a treat. Chef Marco himself had the floor; their cameras were at the ready.

But he stormed out into the back hallway and kicked in the door to his small closet of an office. There was a bottle and a baggie in the top drawer. He took a pull of whiskey first and it burned his guts. The scream and the smash sounded off through the whole place. And then it was quiet.

Marco didn't emerge until he was through with the contents of the bag that helped him forget the burn in his belly. His staff knew to leave him alone. There was chatter behind the line that he was going to spend their two remaining stars away. The two at the tasting table starting filming.

"What are we waiting on?" he asked. "Look at this," he shouted. It was still quiet with the exception of the constant conveyance of tickets screeching from the machine. "There's no weeds in my kitchen, let's do this," he said, clapping his hands. Chef finished buttoning his jacket before he jumped in to expedite them through the worst of the backup he helped to create.



Most men have their place of escape. For some, it's peace and quiet; a hike in the mountains; a hunt in the county; fishing in their secret spot; a long and open stretch of road on the back of a Harley; a cigar and a glass of scotch. For others, it's fight night; watching the game in a crowded bar; league nights at the local lanes; roasting something whole. Not a lot of them are lucky enough to find it all where they work. For Marco, his place of Zen was in the kitchen. The chaos made his engine go; the cocaine gave him fuel.

Marco had a lot of pride, and he had his own way of showing his staff. He was hard on them, but fair, and not any more than he was on himself. He was encouraging when he had to be, and cutthroat when it was needed. They respected him enough to let his habits go. Besides, he wasn't the only one, but at some point, it became more about the rush than the food. His art was plateauing. Since the stars, he hadn't changed the menu much. Day in, day out, in the trenches together they made their daily grind. He was afraid to admit that he was in a rut, so he buried his head nose first and he ran his art and family into the ground.

They were with him that night.



All of that business with the doctor was out of his head when he took the helm. He hadn't even put himself on the schedule in months, but he was there every day. The kitchen ran well without him, but it was what he knew best. He also ate up the attention at the Chef's table, and that night, he hand-delivered and sauced almost every plate.

He cleared his line through the first seating and gathered them to make a speech. That was where Marco had planned on telling them he was taking some time off. He would have asked his Sous Chef, Eric, to step up, and he should have handed over his apron. He wasn't ready for any of that, though. It was the speech he made most every night. He went over what they did right, what they did wrong, where he wanted improvements, and then something unexpected. He thanked every one of them. He told them that they were the reason why Marc had earned the stars, and he told them he owed it to them to earn them back.



Somewhere from deep into the second seating, when the kitchen was humming and the tickets were coming at a healthy clip, came the words that reminded the Chef.

"If I never eat anything again, I can die happy..."

It came from his tasting table. He'd heard niceties, and even other things to the effect of those words. But those ones were spoken with sincerity. They pulled him out from his rhythm and smacked him across his chest. Something made his

mouth water, and for just a whisper of a moment, he wasn't elbows deep in product. He saw himself back to the kitchen of Chef Moretti, smelling the smells and watching from the fire the plates they berthed. It excited him for his own food, and that taste in the air taunted him.

And with that same wisp was brought crashing back the side-splitting horror of his afternoon.

"Fire an extra carbonara, please," he said. "And an order of coppa."

Chef Marco drizzled and dressed the coppa himself, house-cured, of course, and dropped it for the couple at the tasting table. "With my compliments," he said.

The carbonara was his shining star. That was the prophetic 'dying dish' of the table he saluted. It was rich, and dressed with sea urchin, pea shoots, and black truffle. The eggs came from chickens at a local farm, the pancetta was cured in-house, like the coppa; he kneaded his own pasta, and shucked the urchin live. The truffles came from Molise. Marco had been there. He knew the farmer. He needed a moment, and he had the Sous Chef step up to expedite.

There was a stainless corner at the edge of the pastry line, in the middle of the kitchen. It was about the only place he could stand for a moment and be out the way. It was also a spot that could be seen by just about everyone in the kitchen.

With the tips of his fingers, he squared the plate in front of him and drank it all in. This was a dish he dreamt of, and one he'd tried in Vegas, but perfected, and owned. It may well

have brought him the first star. It was a little old hat for such a progressive outfit, but it was a staple that they were hard-pressed to retire.

With the tines of his fork, he teased apart enough strands to twirl, and with the flat of his knife he positioned an exact portion of urchin and truffle. It was perfect; it was beautiful. Unctuous and succulent didn't speak to what melted on his tongue. His taste buds wore velvet and warmth and the salt of the sea made him tingle. His eyes closed and he truly tasted his food for the first time in as long as he could remember.

Marco was young when he walked into Moretti's kitchen. For three years he washed dishes, for a few more he chopped, and the fire in his belly burned for the food. It was his passion, his calling, his reason for cutting heads to get to where he was standing, and the mouthful it culminated in would have brought that boy to his knees.

Then he swallowed.

The pain shot through to his knees. His throat burned with acid and the taste betrayed him and dissolved away with his other two stars. He held together as best he could, but the room started spinning. Right there, in front of the whole world to see, he emptied his guts, and he threw blood and pasta back onto the plate.

Cameras rolled and chaos ensued. The chefs swept him, kicking and screaming, away from the mess he made. No amount of cleaning would allow them to finish service to the guests that watched what transpired. The Maitre D' began the damage control and asked that folks kindly put away

their phones. There was, in fact, protocol, which he so gracefully enacted. Meals were all comped and bottles of wine were brought to delay the exodus while return vouchers could be issued.



This was the first day of the rest of Chef Marco Bertone's hungry little life.

## CHAPTER TWO

# BETWEEN SHIFTS

**M**arco didn't wake up hungover from his vices. To him these were as much a part of the routine as coffee would be to you or me. It wasn't from the lingering torment in his belly, either, or from the burning in his throat. His was a sickness of shame. This was only a matter of time, of course. He was headed for a stumble, whether it be by pride or laurels. There's little room at the top to falter. Drag your feet for a moment and you fall, and from such heights it would be devastating.

It was after midday when he woke. His stomach grumbled with hunger and reproach. The stains were still on his undershirt and smelled of horrible sick. The phone on his floor was full of messages and links to posts that were already going viral. He didn't have any missed calls from the two he wanted to hear from. Surely, they would have figured out what was going on... Surely, they would have been there to console him...

But then he remembered - he hadn't told another soul. That wasn't how he wanted them finding out, either. He had to call again, but he had to get himself out of his own filth.



The shower was lukewarm. Any hotter and it made him dizzy; any colder and it made his guts wrench. In his soaking, sorry state, Marco wondered if it was worse that he was dying, or that he was doing it alone.

Even brushing his teeth was difficult. The baking soda taste in his toothpaste was worse than food. It was a reminder that he couldn't eat. He didn't have it in him to shave; he just stood, clutching the sides of the sink of the sink staring at himself in a wet mirror with red in his eyes and new bile in the corners of his mouth.

The antacids hadn't helped in months, but it was automatic by then. After he rinsed and spit the chalky residue, he gargled with mouthwash and cursed it for not being whiskey. All this time...he thought it was just an ulcer.

"Fucking cancer," he scoffed. "Unbelievable."



Natalia took after her daddy in almost every way. There was no living under his roof without an eager appetite. She had her own set of pots and pans for play, and mostly she banged away on them while he tinkered in the kitchen. He was still a prep cook by the time she could walk, and her first word was 'pasta.' She learned her fractions nearly two grades early. When all her school friends started asking for cell phones, she

wanted a chef's knife. She didn't care about the zoo in the park or going shopping or to a show. She wanted to see the samurai sharpener in Chelsea Market; to try the new pop-up bakery; to eat from every food truck. Instead of a diary, she kept a log of restaurants, and her dream was to collect all the stars that Manhattan had to offer. And when she was in middle school, she wrote an essay on her hero, Chef Marco Bertone.

By then, he was working his way up the line. Sooner rather than later, though, he was too good for the day shift. He wasn't home after school anymore, and they weren't cooking dinner together, or shopping at Zabar's, ogling the caviar and settling on monkfish. Sooner rather than later, he was running the kitchen through six dinner services a week. When he was in the kitchen, he missed his little girl. She was older every time he saw her, and on a good day, he felt how he was letting her slip away. When he was at home, he missed the rush and chaos and fighting for his own kitchen. He was so far removed by the time he hired his first dishwasher her age that he hardly made the connection.



Maria didn't come to the phone that time. Her office staff didn't make any excuses for her either. There was no doubt she saw what had happened. With Marco, there wasn't always another side to the story. Usually, and quite unabashedly, things were just as they appeared. If the world was saying he was taking his spiral hard, and public, they were probably right. On any other day, that would have been the whole truth.

Usually whatever it was that pushed Marco and Maria apart shoved him towards the kitchen. In the end, it was sad that those two were his sun and moon. That meant, for Marco, that what came next - maybe not next, but instead - was damage control.



Between the lunch and dinner shifts in the industry is the mad dash to break down one service and set up for the next. Especially at Marc, where the menus changed almost entirely between the two, that meant that there was considerable work involved. That was work that the fearless leader thought ought to come from his underlings. When he stepped onto the helm, it had better be ready. There are more than one kind of chef, and he was certainly one of them...

His crew didn't expect him between shifts on most days. They especially didn't expect him that day, which was the day after he desecrated his kitchen. For one, he wouldn't have been there to clean up after himself. On the other hand, he handled poor publicity in less than savory ways. They were expecting him to retreat as usual, maybe take the rest of the week, and then start fresh on Monday with some high-horse, come-to-Jesus, rallying of the troops.

There's this wonderful tradition that takes place between the shifts called 'family time.' In an industry wrapped around the cooking and service of meals, there's surprisingly little time to eat the food that's in arm's reach. And besides, that would be stealing. If you've ever wondered what happens between the end of lunch, at around 2:30, and the beginning of dinner,

a few hours after, that's when the whole staff sits together to a meal.



Marco's father was a hard man. He was an ironworker in Brooklyn in the 70's when Marco was a boy, which meant he worked hard to put food on the table. Hardly a night would pass without his reminders. The whistle blew early, so his bedtime was early. On most nights he would drown his sorrows in the spaces between the supper table and his bed. But the supper table was something sacred.

Everything worth happening took place at the table. Coffee with company; homework; birthday parties; Marco's only aunt Antoinette's arrangements; the taxes; breakfast; the scolding Marco got when he got into a fight with Billy Iantosco in the eighth grade; poker night; holidays; the night his older brother was brought home in a squad car; that one time he walked in on his parents; where his father cleaned his revolver. But supper was a ritual; his father insisted, sometimes with a heavy hand. Everyone sat together, they talked about their day, and no one ate until they said grace. Mom served, and Dad took the longest to finish his plate. The kids took turns scraping and clearing the dishes. That was where they were most like a family. That was where Marco would have told them what was going on. That was where he wanted to tell Maria and Natalia.



By quarter to three, the last tickets were fired on the line. Surprisingly, not all of the tables canceled. There were fewer

suits from the city, but the restaurant-watchers knew there would be room for walk-ins. More cameras were at the ready than usual, and there was an awful lot of rubber-necking every time a door swung at the front, behind the bar, or out through the back of the kitchen. Still, 'reservations' was swamped. They were given a script to call and re-confirm the night's seatings, but they were dropping. By the end of lunch, only half a house held their bookings. They were a more discerning crowd.

Eric, the Sous Chef, offered to prep something special for Family, for morale's sake. He was the best in the building, arguably as talented as Chef, and he always brought his best for the staff meal. The line was broken and packed away in record time.

Chef was particular about what they could use for product, and there was a cost ceiling they couldn't cross for that meal. He signed off on the books, and he always questioned when they pushed the limit. On this day, the limit was obliterated. Even Paolo, the maître d', and Victoria, the beverage manager, were in on it. They popped a case of prosecco and the wait staff served up about the best clam bake Brooklyn's ever seen. Cherry stones, razor clams, langoustine, spot prawns, they nearly emptied the raw bar, Manhattan chowder, mussels, peekytoe crabs, caviar, and the pastry chef brought popovers. It was wildly unexpected, especially for the second shifters.

There was a private party room for twenty, but they all fit, if they pulled in a few extra chairs. Chef Eric gave the toast.

"It's been a hell of a few weeks, guys. This is a special place because of you all. We've done some big things together. And none of us would be here without Chef. Restaurants have their problems, especially the successful ones. But without all your hard work, passion, skill, and complete insanity, we will move forward. Some tables canceled tonight. How does that make you all feel? Are we gonna show them tonight or what? Or are we just gonna turn out plates? We're up against it. I want to see fire in your eyes. I want every one of those guests to leave here having the best meal, the best experience, that they've ever had. I want them all talking. I want them to leave here tonight and shout from the rooftops about how much our food ruined them for other restaurants. I want those cancels to regret ever doubting us. We can do that. You all can do that. Don't worry about the stories or the bullshit or what they came here expecting to see. You give them a reason to come back. You let them see just how good this kitchen can be. They'll hear us in Midtown. We owe it to Chef. Raise up," and he raised a toast. The clink went all around the room, and they all repeated "To Chef! Salute."



They were elbows deep, and through the case of wine when his key unlocked the door at the front of the house. Like little kids caught in the cookie jar they started scrambling and looking around the table. Their guilt was unspoken and collective. Paolo wiped the corners of his mouth with the napkin from his lap and waved them to continue eating. He would run interference.

"Chef," he said walking to greet him in the middle of the floor. "How are we feeling today?"

Paolo was the most senior member of the staff. He was cut from old world cloth and he was twelve years Marco's elder. He first met Chef Bertone in Moretti's kitchen, and left with him to open Marc. He believed in the kid. Together, they shook up the culinary world. To say their relationship was purely professional was a gross misjudgment. They were each other's mentor, and Paolo was probably Marco's only real friend. That made him the only person in the room who could patronize Marco like that and get away with it.

"We're just eating. Are you well enough to join us? Do you want to go out back so we can talk?"

"Yeah, actually," he leaned around and looked over Paolo's shoulder, "I wanted to talk to Eric. Is he in there?"

"Yes, of course. Listen, Chef. The guys... Half of the house canceled tonight. They needed this... Let them have it please."

"Needed what?"

"We went a little overboard on the family meal," he chuckled. "For their spirit."

"Oh, I don't... Wait. How overboard?"

He stood aside to let him look.

"Oh Jesus Christ. What the... You know what, it's fine, Eric, let's go. We have to talk. Paolo, finish your...lunch. I'll see you in a few."

The party room went quiet and the clams, all of a sudden, were just a little cold.



"Let's not let this change anything. Mangia, come on," said Paolo.

"What's up his ass?" Said one of the waitstaff.

"You know that Chef is going through a lot right now. Running this place... Maria... He's not a warm and fuzzy guy..."

"You can say that again..."

Heads were slung and any boost to their morale was gone. They were quiet for a while. Mostly, they were listening, trying to hear if there were raised voices in the office.

"Look, Chef Eric was right. We owe a lot to Chef. I owe a lot to Chef. He needs us. I mean it, you are the best group I've worked with. The best. And I should know, I'm old. I've been doing this since before most of you guys were born. This," he said, pointing back to where Marco went, "this is easy. I've been in some tough kitchens in my time. Some of these guys think they're Gods. Chef's a good man. He needs us. This place needs us. Eat. Please."

He picked a few crabs for his own plate and poured himself what was left in the nearest bottle. It wasn't more than a mouthful.



Marco wasn't a man of many words. Sometimes, the ones he spoke were carefully chosen, but if they had to be personal,

they didn't come easy. He came out of the office first, and he never looked back on his way out the front door.

Chef Erik took his time, and the rest of the staff waited. It was getting near time to end their family hour. He let Marco leave and lock up before coming in to close out their dinner and get them ready for service. Paolo was up and after Marco, but it was clear that Eric had instructions.

Eric pursed his lips. He didn't have much to say. He let the rolled apron in his hand do most of the talking.

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE STORY OF THE WOLF

**H**ow was Marco supposed to sleep with surgery to remove half of his stomach in the morning?

He wasn't supposed to eat anything after midnight, and that wasn't going to be a problem. Nothing that thins the blood. Good thing because the whiskey burned. Ibuprofen didn't even take the edge off. Luckily, he cleaned out his desk drawer after he spoke with Eric.



Marco woke up doubled over on the floor, smelling of his own sick again; the blood started crusting around his nose and in the corner of his mouth. Chef Marco, in front of his restaurant, and all the eyes of the culinary world, was not at his bottom. This was Chef Marco at his bottom. He had no one but himself to answer to, and he would prove to be his harshest critic.

His whole life, everything he worked for, the name he built, his family, his kitchen... Even his drugs were gone. And

tomorrow, they would be cutting out his livelihood. There he was, alone, pathetic, without even the strength to cry.

What finally brought him to his feet was the resolve to put an end to the hurting in his head, let out the screams inside, and step aside so his family and his restaurant could move on beyond him. It wasn't about wanting to die. This was too sudden. He knew there was a lot to live for. This was about not knowing how he was supposed to live the rest of his life.



Marco's father's funeral was the saddest day he could remember. His mother got sick years later and died the kind of death a sick, old woman dies; in the hospital, having received last rites, surrounded by the ones she loved. Everyone said she wasn't suffering anymore. His father had an aortic aneurism on his way home from work and crashed into one of the old El train support beams. They said he died instantly.

His father was a big man. He was strong, tough as nails; his hands were big, like a boxer's hands, and they were gritty like concrete. No one was afraid of Marco on the school yard, but no one touched him because of his old man. To every young son, his father is invincible. Sometimes when they get older, they see their father in a different way. Not Marco. The older he got, the harder his father was. He was a cast iron stove. He knew that somewhere there was an iron beam bent around the shape of his old man.

A team of the guys from the brotherhood shouldered the casket, which would remain closed, and marched him in and

out of the church. Marco thought it was funny; his father wore a cross, but he never made it to Sunday mass. They had a full service, and the receiving line stretched out the door and around the corner.

It was sunny at the grave site, but not like you see in the movies. The grass was green, the flowers were in bloom. Marco had on his brother's old navy-colored suit, and his mother helped him tie his tie. He remembered the way his father's watch rattled on her wrist because the bracelet was four links too long from having been strapped around a two-by-four.

The crowd was so big at the cemetery that the priest needed a microphone. Marco didn't want to be there. Death was just something you heard about on the news. The finality of the day hadn't fully hit him, but the details were seared into the backs of his eyes. The last look he got was his father being lowered down into the hole.

He never knew how to say goodbye.



Marco checked his phone, stalling for time. He was hoping for a message or a missed call or some sign not to do what he was dreading. His finger hovered over his daughter's contact for long enough that the screen went dark. He typed and deleted at least four different messages telling her he was sorry, and at least three others explaining everything. None of them were sent.

Marco tried calling Maria. The first one went to voice mail after about ten rings. The second and third time he called, it

clicked over after only two. She was rejecting his calls. Even though they didn't speak, there was some solace in the fact that they were standing in different rooms, in different parts of town, holding their phones and thinking of each other. He had so many chances to have convinced her that call was worth taking and he wasted all of them. His work came first for far too long.

On the nightstand, by the bottle of painkillers, he found an old picture frame, and in it was his favorite picture of Natalia. It was Christmas morning; she was almost five. She asked Santa for an apron like her daddy. They had 'Chef Natty-bug' and a little bumble bee embroidered on the front. Honey was her favorite. She used to make peanut butter and honey sandwiches, but the best way to eat it was off her little finger. She would tip the squeezey bear jar upside down and catch a drop. "Ew, it's sticky, Daddy," she would say. Every time. He used to call her his sticky bear.

'What am I doing?' he thought.

He always wondered whether his father thought of him and his brothers in his last few moments. Even if his old man was gruff, it hurt. Could he be so selfish to leave his little girl the same way?



Marco flushed the pills. He wasn't brave enough to try anything else. He did, however, find all the bravery he needed to march himself into the hospital in the morning and get on with facing what was sure to be his hardest fight.



The mirror gave back a nasty sight. For the first time, he looked like he was dying of cancer. In a way, it was comforting; it told him that something really *was* wrong, and that he hadn't just handed over the keys to his castle for nothing.

His castle...

It took staring death in the bloody, sick-stained face to realize that he loved his own legend more than his own family. But it was false. He couldn't love anything more than his family, but he gave more to his career.

Paolo told him the old Native American story of the two wolves on the day that Marc first opened its doors. It's a famous story, very well known. Chef Marco didn't care to be lectured this way, but he listened, and he smiled, even though he'd heard it before, even though he thought it was trite. Respectful was the wolf he was then, though, not savvy yet to cut the ropes and rise. He was, however, hungry for advice, and his ears were open to hear from every angle. Besides, the headlines and anticipation were for his food, so he wanted to give Paolo – his partner - every opportunity to be heard.

But even the humble wolves hunt.

Marco misunderstood like a man looking only to his own horizon. He took the story to have meaning for how to run his little restaurant. Paolo meant to touch the humble man in Marco and turn him to shore from time to time, not to trick him into gazing only for stars.

They worked together under Chef Morretti, who wasn't always in the kitchen, but when he was, he was always screaming. Marco took his maître d's words to heart. The staff was treated well; he only yelled when it was necessary, and once it was a three-star kitchen, it became necessary more often, even if not much else was changed. As well as he knew Paolo for as many years, he didn't even know of his son until just recently, around the time Marco first spoke of his divorce. The wolf that won the long, hard-fought battle finally felt remorse for his old enemy.

What he fought so hard to keep, in the end, was what he handed away to a younger, hungrier Chef. He told Eric everything; where the books were; how to tip which vendors; where he kept the key for the recipe cards; how to be in touch with his truffle farmer; the story of the wolf. It took having cancer tear away everything he worked so hard to achieve for Marco to realize what he really wanted the whole time.



Washing off his face was a good reminder that he hadn't seen any of the posts from the night before. He was told there were videos.

The videos weren't hard to find.

Marco was at once both ashamed and amused. He was also thankful. He needed to see himself that way to believe it was all happening. At the rate he was going, he would have run his family even further away, and he would have run himself into the ground.

Marco Bertone was going to die sooner than he planned. The wish he wished that night was for enough time to at least let his daughter say goodbye.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# A QUALITY—OF—LIFE THING

Chef Bertone's body was conditioned to rise before the sun. The fish and produce markets were as close to a sanctuary as he'd ever had. He found solace in the chaos and cold. He knew the people and he knew the product, and they knew him, and they welcomed him. Some of the vendors he knew going to back to his days at Moretti's. By then, he was a member of the old guard. There wasn't a spoiled bit of anything in those stalls, but they always seemed to hold aside the best for "Chef." In that way, it probably wasn't necessary to get there before the dawn and greet the boats, but some habits die hard.

He went so far as to keep a dedicated wardrobe; clothes bought for the purpose of getting dirty and wet at the market. The Grundéns deck boots may have been a bit much, but he knew no limits to his dedication to the craft. Most of the familiar faces knew the menu by heart. They lit up when he asked for something new and went to great lengths to make sure he had the best. Some of his finest dishes were inspired by his little talks with his favorite

mongers. Funny, he thought, he never saw them set foot in 'Marc.'

If you've learned anything about our Chef by now, it's that there once was a chef named Marco who was hellbent on attention. Out of habit, he still picked and approved the cases to send. He couldn't deny the fact that a part of him wanted to go so he could hear some well wishes. To a vendor, they greeted him with open arms, with little judgement, and with sincerity when they asked him how he was doing. Even if he gave the same response he gave every day, even if it was just a "Good, you?," it felt great. It was the best kind of send-off he could have imagined. It was the only kind of send-off he wanted.



Marco was almost an hour early to his appointment. Adrenaline, and being scared half into the grave, replaced the coffee he couldn't drink.

He travelled light. The nature of his condition dealt in sensitivity to time. There was also the unknown. His doctor - who was really only his by referral; they'd only first met earlier that month - couldn't say with certainty that he was even operable. About the only thing from the briefing the other day that Marco remembered was that there were odds - slim odds, mind you - that they would find such a mess that their only solution was to stitch him shut. That didn't help with the sour pit in his stomach.

He had that same sour pit the day he first heard those awful words.

Everyone in the waiting room was much older than Marco. It was the bitterness in him that thought these were the kinds of people that should be dying of cancer, not him. That one older gentleman with the gin blossoms on his nose or the woman with yellow stains on her teeth. The whole lot of them, as far as Marco was concerned, should be in line before him.

Everything about that waiting room bothered him. The fluorescent lighting was like a supermarket's, the carpet, a casino's. It had the uncomfortable chairs of a motor vehicle registry, and the vanilla magazines of, well, a doctor's office. It smelled like a hospital; powdered gloves, biological odor eliminator spray, and re-circulated air. That was probably the worst part, until he made his new friend.

Marco was a pretty private person, and on that day, of all days, he wanted nothing to do with anyone else. An older gentleman, probably in his late seventies, got himself up and shuffled over to sit beside him. He was exactly the type that would talk your ear off for the whole bus ride. It was uncomfortable.

"What are ya' in for," he said. He had on corduroys and blue shoes that velcroed. "I bet it's the stomach."

Marco didn't want to even acknowledge him, but he was intrigued.

"Oh yeah? Why do you say that?"

"I've had that," he said. "I know that walk anywhere. Came in for an ulcer. Couldn't eat my wife's gravy. First time in about

forty years for that... They'll tell you that have to act fast, take your stomach out. Blah. Told me I had two years..."

Marco sat up a little to listen.

"That was ten years ago. They said they caught it, but that's because my wife made me go in right away, bless her heart. Saved my life, you know."

"Is she here now? Is that who you're waiting for?"

"No, no," he said. He bit his bottom lip. "She passed. 'Bout a year ago. Miss her every day."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. So why are you here now? Check up?"

"No. Nope, now they want my colon. Can you believe that? If it doesn't get you now... Boy, oh boy."

"Thanks," he said, in the same way he would shoot down menu additions from the line cooks. "Good luck with your colon." He took up an interest in last month's Golf Digest. Marco hated golf.



The hospital wasn't a friendly place for Marco. A lot of his time between shifts was spent in one, chasing out the nurses, demanding to see the doctor. He didn't care if he was a bulldog or if they had worse names for him; his mother was dying. Marco couldn't handle not having control.

After his father passed, Marco took care of things around the house. He cooked with her, and then for her. He handled as

many bills as he could, but he wasn't making enough to support her the way he wanted. His brothers were, but they weren't around as much as they should have been, and they never offered a dime. It all happened within a year from when Marco decided to move out to the city and take his leap. She urged him to go. There was a lot of lost time that year, and he didn't get to see her gradual decline. When he walked in after missing most of the early stages, he almost didn't recognize her. She aged a year for every month. The machines keeping her alive were cold. It hurt to see her that way, and he would have given anything to get back even a single day.

It was obvious how close they'd grown since his father died. She was going to leave a hole in him that he would never fill. Marco loved his mother very much. He never told her.

The thing is, aside from all that other stuff, he didn't trust doctors. In his mind, they didn't care if they helped her, or heard his concerns. She was too far gone for any of the treatments that bring in grant money or insurance kickbacks. The nurses were the ones that guided her gently to her end. They kept him at a safe distance.

But it was something a nurse said to his older brother that crucified him. He came in one day closer to the end. The updates didn't make a difference; nothing could be done by then; she was on palliative care. All he could do to establish his dominance was insist on how to handle the services. What she said was so simple, and she said it in such a simple way. His brother missed the meaning, but it rocked Marco to his core.

She said, "You have the rest of your life to fight about it, don't do it in front of her."



Pre-op was invasive and all of the consult and consenting was a waste of time. He knew the risks. Sooner or later, he was going to die from this, whether they operated or not. Hearing the details of how it might happen didn't bring him any closer to making peace with that. At that point, it was a quality-of-life thing. If there was a chance that he would be a little less sick for long enough to make some amends, that was worth dying for.

Within minutes of being admitted, he was surrounded by flurry of activity. It was going to happen a lot faster than he was expecting. He knew he was sick, but they called in an assault squad. Their urgency made Marco nervous, or at least aware for the first time that his situation was so dire. There was a fight in him, but he surrendered himself to their hands.

The nurses stripped and shaved him and stuck him with the needle for an IV line. They had a hard time finding his veins. His arm was purple and tender by the time the nurse anesthetist was paged. His family wasn't with him, so the white powdered glove held his hand.

They took and bagged his belongings, which were not many. And as fast as he was separated from his identity, save for the band on his wrist, and all his worldly belongings, he was mobilized. Marco was so scared he could see himself from above. Though they tread carefully, at a tempered pace, it felt like he was being rushed to the table. The bag swinging

over his head pumped fluid and meds and they felt warm in his arm. That was the only part of him with any warmth when they entered the operating room.

There was another controlled chaos promising to deliver Marco into a drastically different existence. Everything was white. The staff were scrubbed and masked. They were chatting as if this was just another day at the office. There didn't seem to be the kind of concern he expected; they were cordially preparing to open a dying man and cut out his cancer. It was disheartening at first, and then it was disarming. It was a scene that was remarkably familiar.



Marco's first day on the line was terrifying. In his three years of washing plates and running scalding pans to the chefs fresh from the dryer, he had learned the rhythm of the place. He knew where the floor was slick, and he learned to use it to skid around the corner to where he could drop the skillets for the sauté station. Everything had its place; there was an order to things, however frenetic.

Chef Moretti's was also a closed kitchen. On the other side of the swinging doors there was a refined dining room, complete with leather-backed chairs, linen-skirted tables, and votives full of fresh and exotic flowers. The mirrors and the marble and the steak knives were imported from Italy, and all of the paintings were commissioned for tens of thousands of dollars. It dripped in elegance, opulence even. Chef Moretti set out to show the city that haute cuisine in vaulted temples of epicurean esteem were not reserved only for the

French. It was there than Manhattan saw its first three-star Italian empire spawned.

In the kitchen there was every kind of equipment a young cook could ever imagine. There were things that Marco wouldn't begin to know how to order or have installed. Custom-masoned brick ovens, side-by-side Blodgett roasters, salamanders, a soup and stock basin with boat oars for stirring, machines filled with oil for frying and their twins full of salted water for pasta. That was where the maestro's made their music.

That used to be Marco's most nervous day, his first day as prep cook. It was the longest walk to work he ever had. The Henckels he had wrapped in a hand towel was the stamped kind, one that would have made the Chefs laugh. They demanded excellence. They demanded that every dice was perfect against a ruler, that every batonnet was uniform, chiffonades cut razor thin, and that every julienne was worthy of their stars.

The empty dining room was eerie. He used to enter through the back door in the alley by the dumpsters. But that day, Chef wanted to meet with him. One table was set with a pitcher of ice water and two glasses. Even the waiter who escorted him to sit was intimidating. He was dressed in nine yards of suit cloth with cuff studs and a starched white apron, and here he was in cloth pants, clogs, and a v-neck. Chef didn't make him wait long. He was wearing his Egyptian cotton coat with "Bastiano" stitched neatly on the chest. Sometimes a Chef transcended the title. He didn't say much.

"You've worked very hard. You know my kitchen and you know my food. You know me, now, too, and I'm watching you. I ask a lot of my team. My kitchen is only as strong as the weak link. This is your chance, kid. Don't fuck it up."

His words were less eloquent and encouraging than the rallying cry that was expected. But his shift started before the rest of the line arrived, and as of a few minutes ago, he was late.

Marco wasn't used to seeing the kitchen so quiet. There was a full team prepping in the pastry kitchen, and Marco and one other prep cook chopped from a list taped to the one of the warming lamps. Showing Marco how to do things properly only slowed him down. He had to stop to hone his knife three times chopping cipollinis.

Then when the kitchen crew came trickling in, the place livened. Marco had only seen them at full tilt, when they were fluid and ferocious. They were like the home team in the locker before the kickoff. He would have never expected the two to be the same, until Chef emerged and took the floor. They were snapped to attention, from men into machines, when he began.



The anesthesiologist sat above Marco's head and his machines and monitors surrounded them like a fortress. The last thing he remembered was being cold, counting backwards, under the glaring, sterile, metallic rainbow spotlight.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# THE SECOND TIME CHEF DIED

Pain preceded light through slits. Something hummed and something sounded piercing. His throat hurt and a chill washed over him, but the shiver tore through his inside. He couldn't move. Who did this to him? He was frantic; his body a sandbag, his eyelids overflowing, his chest a pounding steam train. The walls were all around him, swimming, and his lips tingled. He was underwater and he'd swallowed a grenade. A distant dream of dying bled away; he knew that he was dead. And then there was nothing.



The first time Marco snorted cocaine his heart stopped.

Within two months, he had the rhythm of the prep work down. That was fast for Moretti's kitchen. It was six months after that when he was first allowed to portion protein. The Sous Chef taught him directly, but he made him buy a new knife first. He did so with the help of a friend.

By then it was the end of August, and even the temperature-controlled kitchen was almost too hot. Marco had worked in that kitchen for almost four years, but when the buzz about the stars coming out in a few weeks picked up, it was a different kind of exciting. Il Rosmarino (Moretti's culinary institution) was a constant. For twenty years it was an automatic winner of the highest prize. This year, there was a new man in the kitchen; a new set of hands; a new spoke in the wheel. The rest of the team knew how to deliver Chef his glory. It was rumbling in the back of his head from the first day, but the first mentions made him anxious.

Day in, day out, Marco chopped, Marco cleaned, Marco sorted and stored, and he did his best to make the line look good. He did so without almost any sleep. The stars haunted him. The kitchen staff was cool; it was business as usual. There was talk of what they would get Chef for his twentieth. That made things even worse.

Over the next two weeks, he experienced it all - cold sweat, slamming migraine, bleeding nose, tight chest, shaking hands. He cut himself for the first time in his career and ruined a batch of eggplants. And then came the day.

Marco almost didn't show up. It's not uncommon for restaurants to have unexpected turnover. He could start again from the bottom; he knew how to wash dishes and could work his way back up to prep. If it wasn't such a high-profile place, he would probably start on the line. Why shouldn't he? He put in his time. The pressure was too much, and if they lost a star, Chef Moretti would not be understanding. More than his career would end that day. If his father gave him anything, though, it was a work ethic.

There was a job that needed doing, and almost a year in, that job had his name on it. Chef Moretti chose him for his team, if it wasn't a three-star team, it wouldn't have been his fault. With reluctance, he dragged himself across town with his new knife, wrapped in its new leather roll.

He wasn't exactly sure what to expect, but the kitchen was quiet, the pastry chefs were prepping, and he and the other prep, Antonio, worked through their chores. They received the shipment, made stock, chopped ingredients, sliced prosciutto, diced pancetta, and prepped stations. Chef received the call that morning and was told that they were, once again, on the list. This was no surprise. Moretti himself, just like the other years that Marco was in the kitchen, cooked the family dinner that afternoon. It was his way of saying thank you for a hard-fought year. He pulled out stops, but it wasn't what you'd think; his family meal was never fancy. It was always something from his childhood; something that reminded him of his 'Mama'. On that day, it was bracirole, and it was outstanding. It could have been on any menu in Little Italy and it would have made any one of those places known. There was no mention of it while they were gathering.

The announcement of the list always came during the split between services. Paolo, who was conspicuously absent, received it from the office. He straightened his tie before he threw the door open. Over his forearm was draped a white linen cloth, and in his hand, propped on the tips of five fingers, a silver platter covered over with a silver serving dome.

The room went quiet, save for settling forks. Marco had seen, and nearly forgotten, this shtick. It was a scene that harkened the Orient Express. Chef Moretti stood and harrumphed. With grand gesture, he whipped away the lid for only Chef to see, of course. And Chef, of course, scratched his chin at what he saw. It was the same thing every year. Everyone knew by then.

At some point, years ago, Paolo purchased a handful of star-shaped lapel pins made of mirrored silver. Atop a neatly folded napkin, there were three.

There was a vigor in them for service. Chef spent most of the evening in the dining room shaking hands, pouring wine, kissing cheeks, spooning things to try. Twenty years. He practically owned the city that night. It was an occasion to say the least.

With the same kind of vigor, the team broke down the service at the end of the tickets. No sooner than the suds were washed away, and the floors were swept clean, came the prosecco.

"Ah, champagne is for the French," said Moretti. "A toast! To twenty years. Salut!"

They partied right there in the kitchen until the wee hours. Chef didn't wait around for very long, and not long after he left it began.

Marco knew what the baggies were. He didn't really see where they came from, just that way more of them were into it than he would have imagined. They started with bumps off of their wrists, be he had to be initiated. They made him

blow a line off the blade of his stamped Henckels. That's how he learned that he was noticed for his knife. But it was all in good fun.

Not fifteen minutes after the head rush, he hit the floor.



Marco had a hard time coming out of the anesthesia. He'd put enough junk in his system over the years that his heart had to battle to overcome its effects. He knew the labs wouldn't hide anything, but he chose not to tell the doctor what was in him. This was the second time Chef died, and the second time he had to have CPR. Only this time, the chest they pumped was fresh with sutures.

He was asleep, immune to the chaotic scene he was causing. They called for a Code.

By the time he had a shockable rhythm, there was a line at the door to give compressions. One of the newer nurses couldn't handle seeing the blood. The doctor running the code called for a clear and sent the require package of volts. His body lifted and tightened and fell back onto the bed.

The machine scanned and found a rhythm.

Marco woke first on the inside and then he slowly roused, spitting blood. A part of him liked it better the other way, when it was quiet. He was in the center of a sudden swarm, alone with the thoughts that something terrible went wrong. The resident was by his side explaining about the anesthesia. Wide-eyed and vacant, he nodded, but was only half-hearing what was said by the bleary, white-coated, snapping head. He

had a burning inside from the trauma, and a yearning to be with his daughter.

The next while was a blur, but Chef came around and was finally thankful to feel warm. When he was safe and through the worst of it, they let him try to sleep in the ICU.



Every kitchen worth its salt invests in quality first-aid gear and training for its crew. Chef Moretti insisted that they have CPR and AED certification as well. "The kitchen can be a dangerous place," he'd say. They didn't miss a beat; he dropped, and then moved right in. That was a team that thrived on action and adrenaline. That was a team whose response time was tuned for higher speeds. It was as if they had trained for this; it was liked they'd seen it before.

"Get him up," someone said. "Take him out back." But it wasn't nefarious, like he'd done something wrong to tarnish their time. "He needs some air," he said, "just give him some space."

The conversation that followed had as big an impact on Marco's heart. Antonio came out in the alley with him; the party continued without them.

"Listen, Marco... You can't tell nobody about this, you know. Nobody, you understand?" He wasn't necessarily threatening in his tone. "If this gets out, that's it. This shit happens, but not here. This place is famous. If one of Chef Moretti's prep cooks OD's on coke... In this kitchen?! He can kiss his career goodbye..."

Marco was reeling. He didn't exactly know how he felt. His head hurt and his chest was pounding. The words weren't helping.

"I seen it before. This one Chef I used to work for, real hard ass, you know? Took over the place from his brother who used to own another place where he used to run book. I mean, this guy was a screamer, but he was squeaky clean. This guy was a God. But they never gave him three stars. Never. It was the same thing every year. Two; two; two, you know? He was a better Chef than Moretti, can you believe that?"

"..."

"Anyways. You're a good kid. You've got a future here. Chef likes you. You'll probably make it onto the line before I do. Don't fuck him over."

That night, Marco swore that was a secret he would take to his grave.



It was evening, at least, when Marco was again woken into a swarm of activity. He was still in the ICU bay, but it was clear that he wasn't staying. They were bleary again, and his instinct was to fight, but moving hurt too much. One face, his doctor, came into focus, and he was explaining something. It sounded distant, like through a tunnel. Something was said about bleeding and having to go back under. Another face, that of an anxious thumbnail biter, craned over one of the nurses. He realized that it was Maria when his bed began rolling towards the operating room.

## CHAPTER SIX

# FOR FEAR OF TEARING OPEN

It was a long, dark, dreamless sleep. The television was glowing blue like it only does at night; the sound of the commercial coming through the call button startled him, but when he came to it sounded as though it had always been there. The person sleeping upright in the armchair beside his bed brought back everything from earlier in a rush.



In the short distance between the ICU and the ice cold and blinding white operating room, he became frantic. Not from the physical reminders of the surgery or resuscitation, or from being rushed back in, but from trying to get her attention. He had her attention, but he wanted to know how she knew, and he was, after seeing tears in her eyes, finally afraid.

The want for it to be over was sobering. The angry Chef in Marco laid on the table trying to muster threats aimed at the

surgical team. He was perfectly happy dying on his own, but now they were killing him in front of his family. This wasn't how his wife should have seen him. And all he wanted to know, a question that no one was answering, was whether his daughter was there, too. The same surgeon spoke to the team, and the same team prepped the room while the same anesthesiologist counted him down. The fight in him faded and breathing deep washed away his terror.



Breathing hurt. His head was pounding. No comfort came from the blips on his heart monitor. His voice crackled and wheezed, and her name fell apart on the other side of his chapped lips. The thought of quenching his thirst sent shudders through his gut. The body he was trapped in was heavy and weak, unable to move the three layers of blankets. Most everything below his chest felt like it was missing. The urge to go to the bathroom was only in his head. He hit the call button to summon a nurse.

Maria woke up when the chain rings of the curtain dragged across the track. That was partly why he called. He knew he should have been hungry, and he wanted something, if only to combat the empty feeling beneath the sheets. He was also eager to undo that mess he made of his restaurant...and his reputation. All of the bad spiraled back blinding with the snap of a switch.

The room was stark, sterile, brutal. He couldn't say just why he called, but bandages on his abdomen needed changing anyways. All he felt was pulling and then cooler air. The

nurse pressed against the staples because she could, on account of the medicine. "He does a really nice job," she said.

"What?" Marco asked with withering breaths, unsure if what really concerned her was the doctor's hand for stitchery.

"The incisions are really clean, and the staples are perfect."

"Is that a good thing?" he asked. He stifled a cough for fear of tearing open.

"Well, you'll have minimal scarring, which is..."

"Oh good. Minimal scarring, she says," said Marco. The anger in him brought back his will to speak, but his breath was still labored. "I'm not gonna be around long enough to care about a fucking scar." The color in his cheeks and the pain in the ass came crawling back. He used to feed off being angry like this. If nothing else, that was what was keeping him alive. Of course, his nurse recoiled like she'd had a hand struck reaching at the dinner table before the guests had taken their food.

"Mr. Bertone," she said, after collecting herself, "I'm here to take care of you, and if I finished, I was going to say that it looks nice and clean and we won't have to worry about any infection."

It was hard for a man of his importance to feel any smaller than he was already feeling. That was never her intention, but he reacted. He didn't apologize, but he showed signs that it occurred. She dressed him, measured and drained his bag, scribbled down some notes, replenished his ice chips, and saw to what his wife needed. They were left to the dim blue

glow and washed-out hall lighting, together, alone, for the first time in well over a year.

Her snuffle broke the silence with what she'd been holding at bay. He sighed and turned his head.

"She was just helping, Marco," through tears brought in by more than his sickness. "Why do you do that?" It was answered as expected: with silence.



Marco's brother paid for the whole funeral; Marco and Maria didn't have much to spare. They were, as they said, very grateful. He turned out tickets on the line and she was still in school, and with a young daughter, a few thousand extra dollars simply didn't exist. Their mother left pennies, which didn't help much. Marco was made to feel small by his brother, the hero.

The family wasn't previously aware that she sold the house to Marco for a dollar just months before, and cash couldn't be taken out of it fast enough before the services. That wasn't the way or the time to learn it happened. It happened without consulting anyone, too, but she wanted her say, and there was only one son around during her darkest days. Even then, it was only as often as he could be there.

She knew Marco stood little chance, if any, against his brother, Micah Bertone, attorney-at-law, a veritable shark, who would have relished at the chance to swim circles around his bleeding, baby brother, the screw up. He would have chalked it up to lesson learning. He didn't take it well. In fact, he took the news so poorly that it hammered a

wedge between the two. It didn't help that Marco nearly dangled the keys, flaunting, after a few whiskeys at the repast. Micah probably shouldn't have spoken so freely of his generosity. Even through all of Marco's accolades to come, they rarely spoke after the show those two put on. It almost came to blows; it was terribly embarrassing. Especially for Maria.



Marco's resolve not to respond was newfound and steady. Sure, it was easy to say such things from where she sat, even if she was right. Why *did* he do that? She *was* only trying to help. Poor Marco. Dying of cancer and still forced to focus on his faults.

They use the word battle for such an illness, and Chef was starting to know why all too well. But, his other battle, the one he never expected, was about to begin.