

## Chapter 24 - Ciao Tristezza

*For me, life is like a book. It's one continuous narrative and the best and only thing you can do is be the author of your own adventures or misadventures, as the case may be - Cat*

The New Year arrived and with it a new Luca. This Luca was a stranger to me, and I learned within a few days of his arrival that there was to be no Trieste redux. The tender moments of the past were replaced with chilly politeness. After all, we were still sharing a space.

It was confusing at first, but as I considered Luca's nature, sadly it made sense. The difficult part was him having to show me how things had changed when telling me would have been so much kinder. I was relying on our friendship and those honest conversations we had shared to help get us through things, but I was mistaken.

I knew for certain when I saw the toilet seat up in the bathroom on his first day back. It was the most male of habits, but it had never occurred to me that it was one of his habits because it had never happened before. Putting the toilet seat down was a small courtesy that no longer occurred. The significance of this wasn't lost on me. Neither were the single loads of laundry he was doing or his newfound interest in wearing his bathrobe to sleep when he'd always slept in the nude.

"Are you still comfortable having me in your space?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. You stay as long as you like."

"My return ticket is flexible. I can leave at any time."

"Red, it's fine. You're fine."

In an effort to make myself scarce around the apartment, I took up afternoon residence at the Café Audace. From the moment I first walked in I felt at home. It was a historic café that had been given a new lease on life and a new retro style. With windows that provided a view of the Piazza Unita, the harbor and the surrounding hills, the place inspired me.

Audace. I loved the name, I loved to say it and, more importantly, I loved its meaning. There is a very subtle difference between its meaning in French and Italian and the English definition of the word. Audacious: Webster's defines it as a bold or arrogant disregard of normal restraints, while the French and Italian definitions are a bit more understated:

Mouvement de l'âme qui porte à des actions extraordinaires, au mépris des obstacles et des dangers. Être plein d'audace.

Movement of the soul that leads to extraordinary actions in defiance of obstacles and dangers. Be full of daring.

Una persona intrepido coraggioso

An intrepid and courageous person.

It was in the Café Audace that I made my plans for my last few weeks in Trieste. It was in the Café Audace that I poured my heart onto the page because I wouldn't allow myself to cry. All of the emotion I felt went into my writing, and slowly I began to get my bearings.

**Dateline:** Trieste, Italy—January 2009

In the Hollywood version of *The Princess Bride*, Westley (the pirate) is resuscitated and brought back to life. He marries Princess Buttercup and they ride off happily into the sunset. Many years ago, when I first read William Goldman's version of the story, he explained that the original ending was meant to be quite different. In the real version of the story, Westley dies and there's nothing to be done.

In his abridgement of this lovely little tale, Goldman learns and passes on a valuable lesson: "Sometimes life is just not fair." As someone who is used to the proverbial happy ending, I should have taken issue with that ending but, at the time, I found some comfort in the fact that someone finally told the truth. And so, like most 21-year-olds, I filed that bit of wisdom away for use at a later date.

A few years later I was walking by a downtown skyscraper when I passed a bag lady holding a sign that read, "\$1 for a piece of my mind." As I was, and still am to some extent, in a hurry, I thought the sign said "\$1 for peace of mind."

"Hey girlie, yeah you, Red! Ain't no such thing as a Hollywood ending," the lady had said.

That did not give me peace of mind. I knew she was right, but somehow there had to be an exception, at least for me. I had conveniently forgotten William Goldman's adage on life.

I quickly learned that there were no exceptions, no 11th-hour cavalry rescues and no knights in shining armor. The truth is that people die, promotions don't materialize, the castle is drafty and the prince runs off with the scullery maid. In the second act, your job gets outsourced, you gain weight in strategic places, lovers lie and children keep coming home. So much for happily ever after.

Happily Ever After, What does that mean? I think too often we make the mistake of believing that happily ever after is a place, a destination, an endpoint. But it's not. If, as they say, life is a journey, then the best you can hope for are little pit stops of happiness

along the way. Are we there yet? we used to ask our parents? No! According to Gertrude Stein, there is no there there.

For me, life is like a book. It's one continuous narrative and the best and only thing you can do is be the author of your own adventures or misadventures, as the case may be. Write your own script, don't let someone else write it for you. Make a decision (any decision); if it's the wrong one, fix it. Do your own "interior" decorating and use all the crayons in the box. Give yourself permission and don't let analysis paralysis rule your life.

I came to this realization a bit late in life. Then again I was always something of a late bloomer. It's only in the last five years, since my divorce, that I've been acquiring a colorful new perspective on life. Sometimes it's fun, other times it's puzzling and many times it's damn hard.

I'd like to think I'm a littler wiser, rather than worse, for the wear and tear on my soul. And by and large I am. The mistakes are fewer, the pleasures simpler and the down times a whole lot shorter than they used to be.

At the end of the day, many of the steps forward you take, you take by yourself. Sometimes you get a little help along the way. That's why God invented your mother, sisters, daughters and girlfriends. (Sometimes I think God should have quit while he was ahead.) And then of course there are those other steps, too . . . you know, the ones that have you going around in circles or just plain backward. Unfortunately, those steps are yours alone, every single one of them.

The good news is, as a woman you can always stop and ask for directions. That's not an easy thing to do, especially when you're trying to show that you're calm, confident and in control. How can you ask for help when you're trying to live up to a role that you think everyone expects you to fulfill, that of Wonderful Woman?

That is especially true for me. A lot of people (friends, family members and acquaintances) tell me they live vicariously through me. And I must admit that on paper it all looks pretty exciting and maybe even a little glamorous. Sometimes it is, but most of the time it's a lot of work and it's occasionally a little lonely.

I have traveled the world for my job and have lived in a couple of very lovely cities. My name actually sounds like it belongs to a character in a novel (and I guess in a way it does). But things are not always as they appear and that's why I decided to write it all down, to set the record straight for myself. Because sometimes I am in danger of believing my own press, and it's always better to be humble than to be haughty. It's a much shorter fall when things don't work out.

I often think about what Canadian-born actress Marie Dressler once said when she turned 50: "By the time we hit fifty, we have learned our hardest lessons. We have

found out that only a few things are really important. We have learned to take life seriously, but never ourselves.”

Sometimes when things feel a bit overwhelming, as they do now, I try to take Marie’s advice and focus on those things that are really important while not taking myself too seriously. Like Marie, I don’t really want or need the drama. I much prefer a good comedy.

And so I’m sitting in my favorite café in the Piazza Unita in Trieste, a lovely little city in Northern Italy. I’m jotting down a few hasty notes during what little time I have left as I reflect on the steps that led me here and those steps I have yet to take. How I got here, well that’s an enlightening tale with so many twists and turns that if it didn’t really happen to me, it could almost be a novel.

I reflected on the meaning of loss and realized the only man worth crying over was a dead one. That’s real loss. Anything else is a blessing.

The next two weeks, while Luca traveled, were mine, free and clear. During that time I said my goodbyes to the places and people I’d come to know in a city I’d grown to love. I lined up side trips to Verona, Florence, Milan and cooking school in Bologna. I would use my time to say goodbye to Italy as well. I doubted I would ever return.

During those last few weeks Luca and I spent only four days occupying the same space. One of those days was the day of Barack Obama’s inauguration. Luca has very liberal leanings, so I thought he would be pleased. We were watching history in the making together on television.

“I don’t care who Skypes me. I’m not answering. This is a historic moment,” I said.

We waited for the introduction of dignitaries and then Obama took the platform. Luca chose that exact moment to make a phone call and carry on a lively conversation with a colleague. He’d had all afternoon to make that call, yet at the precise moment of the speech he’d decided to interrupt the broadcast. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and chose to take the high road. I refused to let it upset me. I put on my headset and logged on to MSNBC and watched the ceremony on my laptop. I took some comfort in the fact that I was leaving the next day for cooking school and we wouldn’t have to disturb each other again. Meanwhile, the travel agent was going to get back to me with return flights to Canada.

A few days later I walked into the apartment and startled him. I’d spent a happy three days in Bologna, cooking and eating.

“You look good,” he said. It was the same line he’d used the first day I saw him in Ronchi Airport.

“Don’t start,” I said.

“How was it?”

“Now I know why they call it Bologna: the fat . By the way, I’ve moved my flight up. I’m leaving next week.”

“I understand.”

“I knew you would.”

Later that night for the first time in weeks, he pulled me into his arms. My head lay on his chest. We stayed there, saying nothing and not moving, for what felt like hours, but it was only a few minutes. Then I returned to my side of the bed. It was confusing after so many weeks of not touching each other. I wanted to kiss him because I knew it would be the last time. But I couldn’t. I deserved better and I wouldn’t let myself be taken in one last time, nor would I give myself away. Somewhere along the way he may have lost all respect for me, but I still had a deep well of respect for myself.

My return flight home was Saturday, February 14. How appropriate, I thought, to be returning home to something I loved, Montreal, on Valentine’s Day.

My final act of defiance was to spend my last night in Trieste in the Hotel Posta. By noon on Friday the 13th, three suitcases stood at attention in Luca’s living room. I did a once-over through the apartment and then took my bags to the hotel, returned to the studio and kept myself busy until dinner time and Luca’s return.

“What happened to your suitcases?” he asked.

“I moved them to the hotel.”

“You what?”

He stared at me, his mouth forming words I couldn’t hear. I’d caught him off guard. I’d managed to achieve some balance in the situation. I’d chosen my own exit. He wasn’t the only one who was free.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

I shrugged. It was my turn not to have to explain myself.

“I hate you, I really hate you.” His eyes welled up; it was an amazing display of pseudo-emotion. He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Good, I thought, how does it feel? Somehow I wanted to believe this was more than a show for my benefit, but I couldn’t.

“How can you hate someone you don’t have any feelings for?” I asked.

We ate a quiet dinner. He sat in sullen silence and I slipped into sales mode. I kept the conversation light and amusing, talking about movies and books. It wasn't the first time I had worked to keep up both ends of a conversation. It was a replay of so many of the dinners we'd suffered through over the last several weeks. I'd be damned if I let him affect my evening.

Every so often he would just shake his head in disbelief that I'd changed the endgame to suit me. However friendly he would like to make that last goodbye, I was not going to let him. In the end we were not friends and we would never be again. If I'd learned one thing about Luca, it was that he would never change. He would go on collecting and disregarding women, leaving a trail of broken hearts in his wake.

Luca walked me to the hotel after dinner.

"Thank you for everything," I said. "Trieste is a gift I will always treasure."

"It was nothing. Thank you for the DVD and the backpack. You shouldn't have troubled yourself."

"It was no trouble at all." We stood there for a minute. "Well, goodbye then," I said.

Luca stepped in front of me and wrapped his arms loosely around me. I made a feeble attempt at a hug by raising one arm slightly and patting his back halfheartedly. He kissed the top of my head. It was an embrace I couldn't return.

It could have been, should have been, so much more. The bittersweet ending I'd scripted all those weeks ago had been drastically different than this.

Seven of the top ten of the AFI's (American Film Institute) greatest love stories feature couples who do not end up together. We could have been one of those great love stories; instead, our affair had no more depth or substance than a shared cappuccino at a local coffee bar. What a pity.

Luca stood on the sidewalk and watched me walk through the double doors of the hotel. I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't look back. I asked for my key and walked up the steps to the elevator. The doors opened and I walked in. I punched the button and turned to face forward only once the doors had closed.