

La Rosa Julieanna Childs

He still sneaks away from the women in his family to take his smoke breaks; it's as much of a tradition in their Italian home as Mass and lasagna on Sundays. Sofia knew about his smoking, of course, just like she knew about the whiskey breaks he took in their early years together before the children came along. Grumbling his frustrations whenever she caught him escaping, he'd argue, "A hard-working man should be able to sit in his own home and enjoy a stiff one at the end of a hard day's work without shame." He stood up to her on those nights when he was this side of a three-fingered pour, and she had a way of letting him know where he'd sleep that night if he finished it. After 49 years of marriage, he'd never known her to pick a battle she couldn't win. Sofia held everyone under their roof to the same Catholic standards she was raised with by her parents. He'd seen Jameson take down more than its fair share of tough guys in the neighborhood, but he'd never met a whiskey that could go toe-to-toe with his beautiful wife. He'd talk a big game to her, but he was more afraid of her than anyone he'd ever met. Along the way, she'd figured that out.

Today, he sits at their youngest granddaughter's wedding reception, his heart overflowing with pride and joy. He begins to sneak away before anyone notices, but Sofia's loving gaze catches him. The young man inside him still yearns to wrap her inside his embrace. But his old bones take longer to move these days. He looks over his shoulder at her. Weightlessly, she makes her way around the room, briefly pausing to acknowledge his exit with a smile. They speak their own language, seen and heard by no one else.

His nerves remind him that he'll give his speech shortly. He slips out the back door and into the fresh air. Beyond the beams of sunlight, he finds a group of well-dressed men forging a wall against the brick corner of the building. Their smoke billows up overhead, dismissing them as it rolls away and down the Garden State Parkway. One of the younger

men lights his cigar and congratulations are all around. He pats a tired hand to his breast pocket making sure Sofia's handkerchief is there.

As the group makes their way back inside, he excuses himself to the men's room. Shaking any remaining smoke from his tuxedo jacket, he washes his hands and attends to the image reflected at him. He thinks back to those years of hard work, building the family's construction business from nothing. And it was worth every minute just to see the joy and laughter of his family today. A smile nudges the wrinkles towards his ears. He straightens himself in the full-length mirror, remembering the day he gave their daughter Teresa away at her own wedding. Never without her handkerchief, Sofia wiping the tears throughout the day.

Their daughter has done a great job raising all four of her girls. Adriana turned out especially well, finishing school early and now applying for legal jobs in New York. The last few years have been hard on Teresa, her husband traveling for work most of the time. She's a tough Italian woman though, raised by an even tougher Italian mother.

The night before Teresa's wedding, Sofia gave her an antique trousseau. The hope chest included recipes handed down through the generations, linens, art pieces, and clothing items from Italy they'd brought over when they migrated to the states in the 1960s. The handkerchief in his pocket was Sofia's favorite linen they'd saved from the old country; delicate, beautiful, and strong—just like his girls. Last night Teresa gave Adriana a trousseau of her own, including some of the original items from the trunk that sailed with them when they began their new life in America.

Cleaning his glasses, he remembers when Adriana's boyfriend came to him a year ago to ask for her hand in marriage. He was honored to support Adriana marrying her high-school sweetheart, just like he and Sofia had been.

While he makes his way past the head table where his family sits, Sofia continues to float around, fussing over the arrangements. He pauses to finish his glass of chianti. Adriana joins him, holding his arm as they step up onto the stage.

Unsteady on his feet, he reaches the microphone. With his speech in one hand, he feels for the handkerchief with the other. The linen rests in his pocket, always paying tribute to la Rosa (The Rose). He knows he isn't strong enough to hold his own. From somewhere inside the ballroom a guest taps their glass, gathering the attention of the room. He squints into the crowd, questioning his courage, struggling to adjust his glasses onto the bridge of his nose. He needs Sofia to hold his hand in these moments when his strength fades. His eyes scan the mass of familiar and unknown faces. He wonders if she has gone.

Standing beside her grandfather, Adriana takes his hand. She's as graceful as any bride he's ever seen. Squeezing his hand, she whispers "Nonna is here, papa. I can feel her." Her presence calms his concerns. He kisses her forehead. "She'd be so proud of you today, sweetheart," he whispers into the lace cascading around her face.

And then Sofia's spirit finds him again. Sometimes she's standing near their children, other times she sits beside them. Freeing her handkerchief from his pocket, he wipes his eye. After all these years, it still holds the aroma of her rose perfume.