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Rococo

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CHAPTER ONE

The Duke of Décor on the Jersey Shore

1970



I want you to imagine my house. It's a classic English country cottage, nestled on an inlet overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in the borough of Our Lady of Fatima, New Jersey, about five miles north of Interlaken. The fieldstone exterior gives the illusion of a small fortress, so I softened the overall effect with white hyacinth shrubs and a blanket of sky-blue morning glories cascading over the dormers like loose curls on a cherub. After all, a man's home must first be inviting.

Every morning at sunrise a honeyed pink light fills the front room, throwing a rosy glaze on the walls that cannot be achieved with paint. Believe me, I've tried. I settled instead for a neutral shade on the walls, a delicate beige I call flan. When the walls are tame, the furnishings need to pop. So I found the perfect chintz, with giant jewel-toned flowers of turquoise, coral, and jade bursting on a butter-yellow background, to cover my Louis Quatorze sofa and chairs. The upholstery soaks up the light and warms the room better than a fire blazing in the hearth. Anyone who says you will tire of a bold pattern on your furniture is a fool. The right fabric will give you years of joy; it can become your signature. Scalamandré's Triomphe #26301 has my name on it.

My day begins at dawn as I take my cup of strong black espresso outside to watch the sunrise. I learned this ritual from my mother, who worked in a bread shop. Bakers are the great philosophers of the world, mostly because they have to get up early. When the world is quiet, great art is created—or, at the very least, conceptualized. Now is the moment to sketch, make notes, and dream.

From my front porch, a dignified, simple portal with a slate floor (I laid the charcoal-gray, dusty-mauve, and smoky-blue slabs myself), I watch the colors of the sky and sea change at the whims of the wind. Sometimes the ocean crashes in foamy white waves that look like ruffles. Then, suddenly, the light is gone and everything turns to gray satin. When the sun returns, the charcoal clouds lift away and the world becomes as tranquil as a library, the water as flat as a page in a book, Venetian glass under a blue cloudless sky.

What a boon to live on the water! Such delicious shades and hues! This is a template worthy of the greatest painters. The textures of sand and stone could inspire incomparable sculptures, and the sounds—the steady lapping of the waves, the sweet chirping of the birds—make this a sanctuary. I soak up the view in all its detail and translate this glorious palette to the interiors of local homes. You see, I am the Town Decorator.

Many have compared our little borough to the village my family emigrated from, the enchanting Santa Margherita nestled in the Gulf of Genoa on the Mediterranean coast of Italy. I've been there, but I favor my hometown over the original. Italy, despite its earthiness and charm, can never be New Jersey. Here we value evolution and change; Italy, while it warms the heart, is a monument to the past. In America we change our rooms as often as our fashions. In Italy you're likely to find throw pillows older than the Shroud of Turin. It's just a different way to live.

Part of my job is to convince my clients that change is good, then guide them to the right choices. I remember when I installed a velvet headboard on my cousin Tiki Matera's double bed (she was plagued by insomnia from the cradle) and she told me that, for the first time in her life, she felt so secure that she slept through the night. That Art

Deco touch changed her room and her life—not a small thing. That's the business I'm really in: creating appropriate surroundings to provide comfort and that essential touch of glamour. I built my company, the House of B, and my reputation on it. HOB stands for the eye of Bartolomeo di Crespi and the guts of beauty itself: truth, color, and dramatic sweep, from slipcover to oven mitt. I don't fool around.

My work can't be defined by one particular style. The rococo period where French design and Italian flair came together make my heart leap for joy in my chest. But, I love them all: Chinese Modern, Regency English, French Norman, Prairie Nouveau, Victorian (without the precious), Early American (with the precious), all the Louises from I through V (Vuitton, of course), postwar, prewar, bungalow, foxhole, and even the occasional log cabin. I can go big and I can do small.

I work from the inside out. Truly great interior design includes the rooms you live in and everything your eye can see from your windows. I often bring the colors from outside indoors, which soothes the soul and creates harmony. I may install a reflecting pool outside your living room to catch the moonlight, or plant a garden of wildflowers with a rose arbor anchored over a flowing fountain beyond your kitchen window, or perhaps place a wrought-iron loveseat surrounded by lilac bushes outside your bedroom for a midnight rendezvous.

Your home should inspire you to greater heights of emotion. It should crackle with color and pizzazz. Every detail is important; every tassel, tieback, and sheer should say something. Under my trained eye, stale corners become Roman baths, while bland entryways become magnificent foyers and crappy pasteboard ceilings become frescoes. Let's face it, I can take a ranch and turn it into a villa. In fact, I did that very thing right on Vittorio Drive, three blocks away.

My life as a decorator began not with a sudden flash of inspiration, but with a problem. I was born without symmetry. This is not my real nose. As soon as I was old enough to pull myself up onto the stool in front of my mother's dressing table (an Art Deco red enamel vanity with a pink velvet seat circa 1920), where I could pull the side mirrors in to study my face from three angles, I realized that something had

to be done. From the east, my nose looked like the fin on a Cadillac, from the west, a wedge of pie, and dead on, a frightening pair of black caverns, two nostrils so wide and deep you could lose your luggage in them. It had to go.

As an Italian American, I was born into a family of prominent noses. The di Crespi clan was known for their fish (Pop had a dinghy for clamming and crabbing, and a storefront in town to sell his catch) and their profiles. We were not alone. Our neighbors were also of Italian descent, many from the same village, and they too had versions of The Beak. The variations included all possible shapes, angles, and appointments, all with the same result: too large.

I was raised to be proud of my cultural and nasal heritage, so it wasn't shame that brought me to the surgeon, it was a desire for perfection. My instinct is to create balance. Faces, like buildings, require good bones.

As soon as I could save up enough money (I worked after school and for five summers in the Mandelbaums' bank as a coin sorter and roller), I took the bus from Our Lady of Fatima (OLOF) to the office of Dr. Jonas Berman on East Eighty-sixth Street in Manhattan. I was eighteen years old with a spiral-bound sketch pad under my arm and a checkbook in my pocket.

First, I'd drawn a self-portrait in charcoal, showing my original nose. Then, in a series of detailed drawings, I fashioned the nose I wanted from every angle. Dr. Berman flipped through the pad. Amazed at my artistic skill, he cited Leonardo da Vinci's pencil sketches of early flying machines as being substandard to my talent.

If I was going to have rhinoplasty, I wanted to make sure I had the nose of my dreams. I didn't want a hatchet job that would leave me with a Hollywood pug. I wanted regal, straight, and classic. In short, Italianate without the size. I got exactly what I wanted.

My sister, Toot (as in the song "Toot, Toot, Tootsie," not the toot of a horn), who is eleven years older than me, was the first person to see my new nose when the swelling went down. She was so thrilled at the result that she convinced my father to sell his car so she could have the same surgery. My father, never one to tell a woman no, paid for

her to have The Operation (as my mother came to call it). Never mind that I had worked like a farmer to earn my new profile. But I don't hold a grudge.

Toot elected to have her nose done not in New York City by my capable surgeon, but by a doctor in Jersey City who was rumored to have given Vic Damone his signature tilt. (I am the only person in my family who does not believe in medical bargains.) When Dr. Mavrodontis peeled Toot's bandages off, Mom, Pop, and I were there for the unveiling. Mama clapped her hands joyfully as Papa got a tear in his eye. Talk about change. Her new nose had a sharp tip with an upturn so steep you could hang a Christmas stocking off it. Gone was her old nose, which had looked like an elbow; but was this delicate Ann Miller version an improvement?

To be fair, the new nose gave my sister the dose of self-confidence she needed. She suddenly believed she was beautiful, so she went on a spartan diet of well-done steak and raw tomatoes and lost a good thirty pounds, tweezed her eyebrows and straightened her hair (by sleeping on wet orange-juice cans every night for a year), and, shortly thereafter, in the right pair of black clam diggers and a tight angora sweater, fell in love with Alonzo "Lonnie" Falcone, a jeweler, at a Knights of Columbus weenie roast in Belmar. Six months later they had a big church wedding at Our Lady of Fatima Church and three sons followed in short order. Her nose may not be perfect, but it was lucky.

817 Corinne Way has been Toot's address for eighteen years. After they lived for a couple of hardscrabble years in a row house in Bayonne, Lonnie's business took off, so they bought a home in OLOF to be near my folks. When Toot and Lonnie divorced, she got the house, a lovely Georgian with grand Palladian columns anchoring a polished oak door trimmed in squares of leaded glass.

I pull up in the driveway next to my sister's chartreuse Cadillac. I get out of the car, taking a small footstool that I reupholstered for Toot with me. The lawn is freshly mowed and green. The boxwood hedges are trimmed and tidy. Everything about the exterior of the house is appropriate except for one glaring design misfire: My sister mucked

up the entrance with a countrified porch swing she found at a tag sale in Maine. I tell her that a Georgian with a porch swing is like a hooker in a girdle, but she keeps the swing and I keep my mouth shut. The truth is, I'm a little afraid of her. Toot has always been a second mother to me, and any Italian son will tell you that two Italian mothers in a lifetime is a handful. I'm not complaining, because we adore each other; I defer to her on family matters, and she to me on aesthetic ones (most of the time; after all, she kept the swing).

"I'm here!" I holler cheerfully. Toot's house always smells of anisette and fresh-perked coffee, the lovely bouquet of our mother's home.

"Back here, B," she yells.

Carrying the footstool I'd re-covered in pale blue wool for her boudoir, I make my way down the long hallway, which is papered in a Schumacher pale-yellow-and-white paisley print. I decorated the entire house, but my favorite room is her kitchen. I did a real number on it.

First, I sent my sister to Las Vegas to visit Cousin Iggy With The Asthma for three months. Then I gutted the old kitchen. I installed a bay window on the back wall to maximize the light and designed a Roman shade of pure white muslin to let in the sun but keep out the nosy neighbors. Underneath I built a window seat with cushions covered in a practical red cotton twill (Duralee Hot Red #429). I believe that any fabrics used in a kitchen should be washable.

For fun, I used oversized zippers on the seat cushions to pick up the metal accents of the appliances. To bring nature indoors, I used rustic white birch paneling on the wall around the window. I papered the remaining walls with a bold Colefax and Fowler red-and-white stripe and installed white Formica cabinets with red ceramic pulls. The result is peppermint-candy delish!

The countertop, in white marble, has an extension that swings out in an L shape to make a breakfast nook, with sleek bar stools covered in white patent leather with brass-stud trim. The studs are an excellent accent to the shimmering copper pots that hang over the sink area like charms on a bracelet. The refrigerator (side-by-side) and

stove (gas) were purchased in white, but I had them delivered to Chubby's Garage, where they were jet-spray-painted a bright, shiny, fiery red. I'm forever thinking of ways to give design that extra kick, using unlikely sources. Take note.

The kitchen table is topped with wide white ceramic tiles. Beneath the table, I installed a cutting board that pulls out for additional workspace. It comes in handy when Toot makes pasta. The table is surrounded by cozy booth seating in a cheerful red gingham. The palette works. It's vibrant! It's up! When you stand in this kitchen, you feel as though you are on the inside of a tomato, the exact effect I wanted.

"You like my pants set? It's new." Toot does her version of a model's twirl, pointing her right foot out in front of the left and holding her arms out waist-high like a milkmaid. The sweater is a disaster, an enormous white pilgrim collar on a cable-knit orange cardigan. (I can see that the wool is a fine cashmere, but what good is it? The eye sees round, round, round instead of sleek. My sister needs length, not width.) The brown slacks have a wide bell hem. She looks like a piece of candy corn. "It's a St. John knit," she says, giving me an in-the-know wink.

"Only a saint could get away with such a color combination," I say.

Like all Mediterranean girls, my sister is aging well. By soft candlelight or with the help of a dimmer switch, she has the look of a plump Natalie Wood. In broad daylight, she's a dead ringer for our great-grandmother, the pleasantly pudgy Bartolomea Farfanfiglia, whom we never knew, but who stares at us with disgust from a sepia photograph on the television set.

"I'm going to get my teeth capped," my sister announces.

Keep in mind, it is always something with Toot. Self-improvement is her Holy Grail. If she isn't going on a diet of Metrecal shakes or installing an in-ground pool (inspired by the Summer Olympics), there's some other project under way that, alas, she never sees through to completion. I've learned to play along. "Why would you touch your teeth? You have a lovely smile."

"Only when clenched. In repose, I'm a knockout." Toot looks at

her reflection in the oven window. "But when I throw my head back and laugh, it looks like I've been eating black jelly beans for a living."

"So get the caps."

"Darn right. I'm fifty-one years old and I've been grinding my teeth all my life. That's how I work off my nervous energy, and now I'm biting my tongue all the time. See?" Toot pulls the sides of her mouth open with her forefingers. "I'm afraid the constant gnashing is gonna give me mouth cancer. Not my fault, though. I use the Waterpik. My oral surgeon said everything shifts when you go through The Change." Toot motions for me to sit down. "Another reason to throw myself out the attic window and not look down."

Toot goes to the sink and washes her hands while I display the recovered boudoir stool on the window seat for her appraisal. "Well, do you like it?"

"It's cute," she says. "I'll put it next to the chaise lounge."

"Toot, how many times do I have to tell you, it's chaise *longue*, not lounge. *Longue* means 'long' in French."

"When I'm lying on it, I'm lounging. What's the damn difference what we call it?"

"Because it's *wrong*. I don't make these things up." I try not to snap. "These are historical terms we use in the design field. Please respect them. Make an effort."

Toot shrugs as she pries open a large Tupperware cookie saver and carefully lifts iced coconut cookies out onto a plate. "I've got so much on me, B." She breaks off a corner of a blue frosted cookie and eats it, then hands me a pink cookie. Soon our blood sugar reaches a comfortable high and we relax into the soft booth like spoons in cake batter. Toot pours hot coffee into two red-and-white polka-dot mugs. She scoots the sugar bowl and creamer toward me and places a small silver spoon on a red-and-white gingham napkin next to the mug.

The crease between her eyes relaxes as she takes a larger piece of cookie and dunks it into her coffee. I can't count the number of times in my life I have sat at my sister's kitchen table and dunked something sweet into a mug of something hot. The ritual always brings me great

comfort. Toot picks up the cookie like it's the Sacred Host at Mass and says, "After the new year, I'm giving these up for good."

"It's April."

Toot chews. "I need a few months to practice."

My sister has delicate hands for her size. Her given name, Nicolina, means "Little Nicky," but I don't remember her ever being small. I remember my mother taking us shopping for bathing suits when I was little, and Toot weeping behind a muslin curtain, saying, "The size sixteen is too tight." Of course, I was young during the final sputtering of the Great Depression. The girls wore one-piece black wool bathing suits to the shore, and the only embellishments were buttons. Toot had her heart set on a boat-neck maillot she'd seen Myrna Loy wearing poolside in *Modern Screen* magazine. No one had the heart to tell her that the only thing she had in common with Myrna Loy was the occasional freckle. My mother, God bless her, kept steering her toward the old-lady styles and away from the Young Sophisticates, knowing that Toot wouldn't fit into the fashionable suits. Toot kept arguing, telling Ma, "I'm young! I want a girlish suit!" Finally my mama lost patience and said, "*Non puoi uccidere una mosca con un cannone*," which, loosely translated, means, "You can't stuff an olive with a drumstick."

"Good, huh?" Toot watches me chew. I give her an okay sign with my fingers so as not to choke on the crumbs. "So are you with me on the teeth?"

"Whatever you want to do is fine."

"It's not just cosmetic, B. Though, at my age, you look for little avenues of self-improvement even if they lead you up a blind alley of ugly. I wish it were just naturalism—"

"Narcissism."

"Uh-huh. But it's medical. I can't chew. I have to chop my salad so fine it's like soup. What the hell, maybe I'll lose a couple of pounds."

It occurs to me that my sister has grown larger over the years out of necessity. Without a man around, she had to stay the size of her sons to keep order in this crazy home. I did all I could to help, but it

wasn't enough. My nephews, Nicholas and Anthony, are, sadly, *gavones*. Yet there's a ray of hope: Her youngest son, my namesake, Bartolomeo the Second (whom we call Two), seems to have my artistic eye. He's a theater major at Villanova.

"Well, who are you going to?"

"Dr. Pomerance. The man is a genius. They say he did Hubert Humphrey's teeth."

"He had his teeth capped? It doesn't look it."

"Old pictures." She shrugs. "Listen. I need a flavor."

"Uh-huh." My sister, who doesn't know "longue" from "lounge," has always said "flavor" instead of "favor," and I'm not about to start correcting her now.

"It's my Nicky. He's moved into a house in Freehold with . . . her."

"The girlfriend?"

"Ondine Doyle. Sounds cheap, doesn't it?"

"Actually it sounds like a flounder special at the Mayfair."

"That's not even slightly funny." Toot fans herself. "It makes me sick. Rosemary Callabuono has loved my son since high school, and he won't give her a tumble."

"Rosemary With The Lupus?"

"Yeah, but it's in remission. Better a woman with lupus than a woman with no virtue. Of all the girls in the world, he chooses *that*. Please."

I try to picture Ondine. It's not easy, since my nephew changes girlfriends as often as he changes pants. I recall a curvy, petite blonde with short legs and an upturned nose. "Is she the one who sat in his lap at the Feast party?" I ask, remembering her grinding into my nephew like a drill bit while the band played "Louie, Louie."

"That's the one! She hooked him with sex. They're not kidding me. Nicky said, 'I love her, Ma.' I said to him, 'You love your ass!' "

"Why is it fast girls always have French names?"

"How the hell would I know?" Toots's eyebrows weave together, the lines quizzically forming the shape of a bird in flight.

"If Nicky's moved out, that means you have an empty room."

"Don't get any ideas," she warns. "I'm not ready to redecorate. I think I'm going to put an exercise bike in there."

"Wonderful!"

"Maybe I can build up a little muscle tone."

"Good idea." I am nothing if not supportive.

"What? I look flabby?"

"No, no, it's just that exercise gives you pep. And who couldn't use a little extra pep?"

"You have a point." Toot smiles.

I've learned over the years to stay mum with my sister on the subject of physical fitness. She's never broken a sweat in her life, yet the basement is filled with every new piece of exercise equipment that comes on the market. A couple of years ago Woolworth's carried the revolutionary Tummy Chummy, a small wheel with two handles for toning stomach muscles. Toot bought it, took it home, got down on her knees, and commenced rolling; but her abdominal muscles were so weak she collapsed on the wheel, hit her head on a chair, and gave herself a black eye. *Ciao, ciao,* Tummy Chummy.

"I'm so ashamed of my son. Shacking up in Freehold like he was raised in a barn. They live in the nicer section, but still . . . it looks like a rat hole." Toot holds her nose. "Everything about it is *stashad.* Mark my words. Nineteen seventy is the beginning of the end of civilization. Morality has gone right out the window." Toot sips her coffee. "They need curtains—"

"Draperies," I correct her.

"Draperies. Furniture. Lonnie said he'd pay."

"Good. Because I'm busy. I don't have time to run around shopping for deals."

"Believe me, if she was a quality individual, I could trust her to do the decorating, but she's from the side of the tracks where the houses shake when the trains go by, so she doesn't know from nice. She doesn't own foundation garments. I know for a fact she doesn't own a slip, because I saw France when she climbed into Nicky's car after we visited Aunt Mary Mix-Up at the home."

"At least she visits the infirm."

"Nicky dragged her. Oh, I could cry. No class. She wears open-toed sandals in December without stockings. You get the picture. Everything about her clings."

"She's young."

"Seven years older than Nicky. No prize there, I'm telling you. She's well on her way to wizened. You don't know. You don't have children. How could you know the disappointment, so deep I get a shooting pain in my pelvis—"

"Stop," I interrupt. Toot has a terrible habit of getting pains in places men would prefer never to hear about.

"My pelvic bone. Right here." She points south. I don't look. "No wonder it became inflamed when Nicky passed through the birth canal. It was like an omen. Nine pounds of him dragged through me like a wagon wheel. And didn't the little bastard bring me pain for the rest of my life?"

"Come on. You adore him."

"I know. I hate him and I love him so much I could kill him. Why would my firstborn son waste himself on *that*?"

"Maybe he loves her."

Toot gives me a look as though the stench from the Carbone paper factory in Hazlet were right here in Peppermint Candy Land. "If only Ma was here."

"If Ma were here, what? She'd commiserate, but neither of you would say or do one damn thing to fix it, because you're Italian mothers." I feel my face flush as I raise my voice. Toot looks startled. "That's right, Toot, you're all talk. You have these sons—you treat them like kings, waiting on them hand and foot, spoiling them, coddling them, worshipping them, never expecting them to lift a finger to help you in any way—then you're surprised when they fall for these come-hither French maids instead of nice Catholic girls. You want to know why they end up with harlots? Because your boys know *easy*, that's why!"

"I suppose it's all *my* fault!" Toot says, banging the table and beginning to weep. Her mascara runs. Big navy blue tears roll down her

face like ink from a dropper. She wipes the streaks away with a white *moppeen*.

"Partly!" I yell back. "But not all! Mama raised me like you raised your boys, with one difference. I knew better! I wanted to take care of myself. I took pride in my surroundings. I tried to build upon what our parents taught us. When I watched Ma iron, I thought, *I can do that collar better*, and I'd show her how. When she made soup, I thought, *I can chop the celery finer*, and I'd take the knife from her hands. When she decorated the Christmas wreath, I thought, *That bow is too big*, and I'd fix it. Mama was never my maid."

Toot wearily opens a cabinet neatly filled with extra utensils from Chinese takeout, a stack of paper plates from last summer's Fourth of July party, and plastic cups that say HAPPY EASTER. She pulls out a Santa-and-the-reindeer paper plate and stacks cookies on it. "What can I do now? They're men. The ship has failed."

"*Sailed*, sis. Sailed."

"I want you to take these over to Nicky. God knows if he gets enough to eat over there. Of course, that's probably my fault too."

"Probably. If your Mother Guilt was paint, I'd have enough to put a coat on Yankee Stadium. You did the best you could. *Fini*."

A buzzer blasts from the laundry room.

"That's the dryer." Toot wipes away her tears, then gets up and goes into the next room. She returns with a basket of freshly laundered whites. She pulls a pristine undershirt from the pile and folds it.

"Whose laundry is that?"

"What?" she asks innocently.

"Whose is it?"

"Nicky's," she says softly.

"He's living in his own home and you're still doing his laundry? What kind of nonsense is that?"

Toot ignores the question and tilts her chin toward heaven. "Do you think Ma knows her favorite grandson is living in sin?"

"Of course she knows, and she doesn't care. She's flying around up there like an angel, probably at the speed of sound to avoid running into Pop."