

# *The Broken Heart Diet*

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*For Rachel*

*Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.*  
— Hippocrates

# Chapter 1

Dante Palermo walked along the Las Vegas strip desperately trying to hold in the biggest secret of his life. None of his friends or family knew. But among the brilliant lights, the faux architectural wonders of New York, Paris, Venice, Egypt, the eyes of every passerby seemed to try to coax Dante's secret out of him.

He took the hand of the woman by his side—Abby, the most incredible woman he'd ever known. His grin grew wider, and he couldn't help singing and snapping his fingers like Bobby Darin back in 1962.

"I'm dancin' all over the world. And singing along. And singing along. Ah, go get 'em Eddy."

Abby looked at him with an arched eyebrow. "And who's Eddy?"

"I made him up. He's the leader of the band in my head. We play every weekend at the Joker Lounge."

The older couple walking a few yards ahead, who wore matching Iowa State Fair T-shirts, turned and regarded Dante as though he'd forgotten to take his Ritalin.

"Hey," Dante said to them, "I'm originally from Des Moines."

The couple nodded and smiled.

"And you know what else?" Again, Dante's singing rang out in the Las Vegas night. "I'm dancin' all over the world."

Abby rolled her eyes, but Dante grinned. And why not? In a week,

back home in San Francisco, he would sign the lease on his first restaurant, Pane e Vino. He'd be chef and co-owner of a restaurant in one of the great food cities of the world, in one of its historic neighborhoods, North Beach.

His Nonna Isabella, who died when he was eighteen, would be so proud. Much of what he knew about food, and even about life, he'd learned from her. She taught him to cook with her favorite ingredient: love. Without her, he might not be a chef, and certainly would not be as successful.

But the restaurant was only half the reason for Dante's euphoria. The other was about to happen in just a few minutes. He fingered the small velvet bag in his pocket that held a one-carat diamond engagement ring.

He had known he'd be in this place, at this time, maybe from the first moment he saw Abby standing in the lobby of the Monte Carlo Hotel two years before. He hadn't been looking for his true love that night. In fact, he'd given up on finding anyone to share his heart with. But when he saw Abby's green eyes, the way she looked at him, the way she smiled, Nonna's words rang in his ears: *Fidati dell'imprevisto*—trust the unexpected. Now, here they were.

He squeezed Abby's hand.

She smiled weakly.

"You worried about Zoe?" Dante said. An hour earlier, when they had been sweaty and naked in bed, she hadn't seemed worried.

"A little I guess." Abby had spent the last week in New York on a business trip, and she had brought her four-year-old daughter, Zoe, with her to spend time with her dad, Abby's ex, who had moved back there earlier in the year. "She loves getting to stay with her dad, and she had a great visit with my parents. But I still worry that since her dad moved, it's been a little hard on her."

"Well, I'm glad you were able to make it here."

They approached a giant bright red neon Coke bottle where a street musician, whom Dante had earlier paid fifty bucks to be there,

honked and wailed on his saxophone with his eyes closed in be-bop bliss. Dante directed Abby to sit on a nearby bench, then went over to the sax player.

Dante glared at him. "You're supposed to be playing romantic music."

"Sorry, didn't see you coming." The sax player's breath smelled of Swisher Sweets and Hennessy.

"That's okay. Now just wait for my signal."

Dante went back and sat next to Abby, then nodded to the musician, who started playing "That's Amore."

Dante's eyes crossed six different ways. "Hold on," he said to Abby. He jumped up and ran over to the musician. "What are you doing?"

"Playing the song you requested."

"I requested 'That's All.'"

The performer smiled sheepishly. "Oh yeah." Then he played a mellifluous rendition of "That's All" that the great Lester Young would have been proud of.

Dante went back to his place next to Abby, and took both her hands.

"What's going on, Dante?"

"It was right here," he said, "exactly two years ago tonight that we had our first kiss. It was the most extraordinary kiss I've ever experienced." Dante's voice broke. "It changed my life."

Abby turned and looked at the ground. Dante tucked her dark hair behind her ear. Then a tiny drop of water fell onto the back of his hand. He looked up to see if it had started raining, but the sky above was clear darkness. Another drop hit his wrist. This time he saw that it came from Abby's cheek.

A tear of joy, maybe?

A closer look at her face revealed the truth.

Dante squeezed her hand. "What's wrong?"

Now Abby's tears flowed freely. She put the back of her hand to her mouth. "I didn't mean to do this tonight."

"Do what?" A chill ran down his spine like a streaking Jack Frost,

naked, arms in the air. The shiver went all the way down to the heels of his feet.

Abby stared at the sidewalk for what seemed like an hour, then finally said, "I have a job offer with Cook Network in New York."

The rest of the strip went dark and Dante just stared at Abby. He couldn't feel his hands or his feet. His arms or legs. And it felt like his heart had stopped beating.

She wiped the tears from her cheek. "It's a huge promotion for me, VP of Marketing."

Dante forced his heart out of his throat. "So what does that mean for us?"

Abby took a deep breath. "I wasn't sure I was going to take the job. But the other morning I was sitting in my parents' kitchen, watching the two of them. They seemed older than I thought they should be. Do you know what I mean?"

Dante could hardly breathe, let alone speak. He finally said, "I guess."

"And I want Zoe to have time with them. My grandparents were such an important part of my life growing up, and I know what your nonna meant to you. So I've decided to take the job."

Dante closed his eyes. He felt like his entire body was shaking.

Abby put her hand on his shoulder. "You're going to be so busy with the new restaurant. I do love you. But I have to move back home to New York and I can't ask you to leave your dream behind. That doesn't give us much of a future together."

Dante could only nod. He sat in silence as Abby kept talking. She didn't want to try to maintain their relationship long-distance. She thought a clean break was best.

Finally, Abby said she would find another room that night, then fly home in the morning. She didn't say they'd talk more about it later. When she said goodbye, it sounded like forever.

Dante sat with his head in his hands until the street musician sat next to him and handed him the bottle of Hennessy. Dante swigged



the cognac and handed it back.

“Thanks.”

“I didn’t mess that up, did I?”

Dante shook his head, then returned his head to his hands.

“I was married once,” the sax man said. “Long time ago. I wasn’t ready. Or I wasn’t ready to marry my wife, and she was a fine woman. Getting married just made me miserable. Made her even more miserable. I always think how much luckier we’d’ve been if she’d said ‘no’ when I proposed.”

Dante didn’t say a word. The saxophonist held out the bottle of Hennessy again.

“No, thanks.”

The musician stood. “Good luck to you, my brother.” He patted Dante on the back, then left.

Dante sat on that bench, imagining that his heart was a black tumor in his chest. After an hour, he wondered if perhaps he was dreaming. He shook himself, but did not awaken in his bed, relieved to find the situation had only been a nightmare. He had been rejected. Dumped.