

Dante's Day Off

S.L. Wallace

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The head surgeon snipped the last thread and stepped back. "Well, that's it. Now we wait."

For a moment, the only sound was the gentle beep of the heart monitor; the only motion, the rise and fall of the patient's chest. A grueling 18 hours after they had begun, the surgery was complete, and the team had come farther than anyone ever had before. Beneath the excitement of accomplishment, an underlying current of exhaustion was present on every face: dark circles under eyes, slack expressions and slumped shoulders. Although the chalk marks on the floor that had kept everyone in the right place at the right time no longer mattered, most of the anesthesiologists, lab technicians and nurses remained in their last positions, anxious for the patient to awaken.

A nurse's gasp drew their attention when the patient opened its eyes.

Sharp teeth snapped at one of the lab techs who quickly stepped back and bumped into a stainless steel tray. Medical instruments crashed to the floor as two other technicians rushed forward to tighten the restraints.

"Damn animal almost took off my finger." The man chuckled nervously.

"He nearly got you," the surgeon confirmed. He shone a pen light above the Rhesus monkey's head. A pair of amber eyes followed the beam of light as it moved back and forth across its field of vision. "Optical nerves appear to be functioning correctly." Then the surgeon reached to the side and picked up a small dog training device. When he pressed the clicker, the monkey blinked at the sound. "Hearing is in working order. Nurse?" The surgeon handed her the device, and in turn, she handed him a wooden skewer with a piece of cantaloupe on it. Slowly, he inserted the sweet cube into the monkey's mouth. The animal sucked on it, then chewed, swallowed, and licked its lips. A comprehensive sigh filled the room.

"And that was in 1970?" Loretta asked.

"Yes, indeed." Dante's eyes twinkled at the thought. "The first successful head transplant!"

"To a cute little monkey!"

"Cute? From what I've read, it was a vicious animal."

"And wouldn't you be? I mean if some scientists had hacked off your head and put it on someone else's body? I'd want to take a bite out of them too."

Dante stared at Loretta. Perhaps she hadn't been the best one to ask.

"And now you want me to sign this—this paper saying I'm okay with you giving away your body, or shall I say your head, for some sort of sick experimentation?"

"Yes! Well, no, it's not quite like that. I'm just asking you to be a witness. You don't have to agree to any of it."

"It's wrong, Dante." Loretta pushed the paper back into his hands. He set it on the glass tabletop and placed a rock on it, so the cool evening breeze wouldn't blow it away. Then he poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Loretta.

"No, it's not," he said. "Those experiments were on monkeys, not people. And they led to a lot of life-saving practices that we take for granted today."

"But the poor animal had no choice in the matter. It wasn't injured beforehand. That's what you said, right? Some doctors just decided to hack off its head and play God, like Dr. Frankenstein. And what about the other one?"

"The other one?"

“Yes, the one that donated its body. There must have been two, you know, to do those experiments. There had to be at least two.”

Dante sighed. He definitely shouldn't have asked Loretta. He had known beforehand that she had cats. He should have realized she'd take the monkey's side. Still, Dante reached for her hand and tried one more time. “Please?”

“Why me?” Loretta narrowed her eyes.

“Because I only have two loves in my life, so it has to be you.” Dante set down his glass and picked up his violin and bow.

Loretta shook her head and smiled as he began to play the soothing melody he'd composed just for her. Leaning back in a wrought iron chair on Dante's rooftop patio, she looked out over Trastevere Square and took a sip of wine.

The next night, Dante unlocked the front door of the apartment building and stepped back to let Natalia enter first. He continued to hold the door open for an elderly neighbor who was carrying a bag of groceries. The gray haired woman winked at him as she passed by; she recognized the raven haired young lady as one of his regulars. Dante winked back at her.

Five minutes later, up on the rooftop terrace, Natalia said, “And that was in 1970?” She tipped the glass of red wine to her lips. They sat against a long cushion Dante had propped against the brick wall of his rooftop patio and watched as dusk colored the sky orange and pink.

“Yep, the 14th of March.”

“Fascinating!”

Dante put his arm around her shoulders, and Natalia settled against him. Although she had moved to Rome months ago when she'd accepted a position as a research assistant in the engineering department at Sapienza, she had first encountered Dante and his music just over a month ago when she saw him perform at Circolo degli Artisti. The club regularly hosted musicians such as Patti Smith and Carmen Consoli, and in her opinion, Dante Marando was better than all the rest combined.

“So they knew how to do it years ago,” he explained, “only they couldn't attach the nerves in the spinal column. It was just too delicate a procedure for the tools they had. It's taken this long for technology to finally catch up to science.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. “My cousin would like you, I think.”

“Your cousin?”

“Uh-huh. He's the reason I knew about the job opening at the university. He works in the biomedical sciences department.”

“Really? Why haven't you mentioned him before?”

Natalia raised her eyebrows. “Do you usually tell your dates about your extended family?”

“Well, I do consider you to be more than just a date.” Dante turned and gently rubbed his nose against hers. “Besides when I look into your eyes, I can't help but think of anyone but you.”

Natalia kissed him lightly on the lips and then pulled back to take another sip of wine. “Oh, Dante. You're cute.” She set the empty glass aside.

On impulse, he blurted out, “Can I ask you something important?”

“Sure, what is it?”

He reached into his back pocket and withdrew a plain white envelope. “I have this document. It's a statement of what I want to do, my wishes if anything were to happen to me.”

She reached for the envelope and withdrew a sheet of paper. "You wrote a will?"

"More like a living will. If anything were to happen to me, an accident or an illness, and it didn't look like I was going to make it, I'd want doctors to keep me going somehow, if possible."

"Yes, I'd think most would want that." Natalia scanned the paper before setting it on her lap. "This is different though. You aren't talking about resuscitation, are you?"

Dante shook his head.

"You really want this?"

"Yes, I do. Will you come with me to the notary and be an additional witness? I want this to be taken seriously by the right people, if anything were to happen—."

"I understand."

Dante smiled. "It's no fun talking about things like this, but I knew you were just the right person to ask." He leaned in close. "So will you be my witness until death do us part?" he whispered, his breath hot on her ear.

Her shivers told Dante he'd found her weak spot.

"Yes, Dante. Yes, I'll be your witness."

"First thing in the morning?"

"Are you asking me to stay the night?" She smiled coyly.

"I thought that was already understood."

"Oh, Dante," Natalia giggled and kissed him again.

After a moment, he pulled back and said, "Just to be clear, um, what exactly does your cousin do?"

"Oh, he's a neurologist."

Dante froze. "Do you believe in destiny?"

"What?"

"Never mind. Can I have his number?"

Natalia shook her head. "I'm too busy to look it up right now." She reached for Dante's shirt and pulled him close.

Dante was enjoying a last bite of pasta in the outdoor dining area of a local cafe when he heard a familiar voice.

"Dante? How are you?"

Momentarily, his back stiffened, but he took a breath and forced himself to relax before standing up and kissing Natalia chastely on the cheek. Then he pulled out a chair for her. "Won't you join us? We're just about done eating. How about coffee?"

"That would be lovely. Thank you." Before taking her seat, Natalia reached across the table to shake hands with the young woman who was seated across from Dante. "Natalia, and you are?"

"Angela." She shot Dante a strained smile. Her lunch break was nearly up, and he'd promised a walk before she had to return to the box office. Standing all day took its toll, and she always looked forward to her lunches with Dante as well as having a chance to stretch her legs a bit. But now, there was coffee. Angela watched as her boyfriend flagged down the waiter and ordered a pot.

"Angela, this is Natalia. She works at Sapienza, and she was going to hook me up with her cousin. Right?" Dante winked at Natalia. "He's a neurologist, and you know how much I love

science. And Natalia, this is Angela. She works at the box office at the Circolo.”

Angela leaned back and eyed Natalia while the waiter poured their coffee. When he was done, he placed the white porcelain pot in the center of the table and walked away.

“You look familiar. How do you know Dante?” Angela asked.

Natalia smiled. “I’ve been to the Circolo before. I especially enjoy Dante’s music.”

“Ah, our boy is talented. Audiences love it when he takes to the stage.” Angela took one sip of coffee before deciding she really didn’t need a jolt of caffeine for the afternoon. She pushed back her chair and stood. “I’m sorry, I can’t stay. I need to get back to work. Will you be by later, sweetie?” She looked at Dante.

He stood as well and kissed her on the cheek. “Yes, I’d like to check the schedule, see if you can fit me in anytime soon.”

“I’ll have the calendar ready for you, so you’ll be prepared when you meet with the boss.” Angela smiled.

After she left, Natalia asked, “What did she mean by that?”

“If I want an upcoming gig, I have to run it by her father. He owns the place.”

“Oh, I see. So there’s nothing going on between you two?”

“What? Why would you even ask that?” Dante moved his chair closer to Natalia’s.

“I don’t know. I just got this sense, and you didn’t exactly introduce me as your girlfriend.”

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous. You know you’re the only woman for me!” He leaned in and kissed her fully on the lips but only after looking over her shoulder to make sure Angela was out of sight.

Then he sat back in his chair and asked, “So when can I meet him?”

“Who?” Natalia asked innocently.

“Who do you think? Your other boyfriend.”

Natalia rolled her eyes.

“I mean your cousin, of course!”

She grinned. “I know. He’ll come to dinner on Thursday, your place, 19:00.”

“My place?” Dante closed his eyes and quickly scanned his social calendar. He’d have to cancel with Suzetta.

Natalia laughed, completely misunderstanding his hesitation. “Don’t look so nervous. I’ll make dinner.”

Natalia was placing a basket of hot dinner rolls on the table when the buzzer rang. Dante had shoved aside a plate of salad and was busy scrawling notes on a piece of sheet music.

“I see you’re hard at work. Can you pause for a minute to come and say hello?” she asked as she hurried over to the intercom to allow her cousin entry into the apartment building.

“Of course.” Dante wrote a few more notes, then set down his pencil and followed Natalia to the front door.

A muscular man with a thin black mustache stepped inside and hugged Natalia. Then he extended his hand; Dante gripped it firmly.

“Pietro, this is my boyfriend, Dante. He’s been wanting to pick your brain. Dante, this is my cousin, Pietro, a world renowned neurologist. I know you both want to talk, but the food is ready.”

“Then let’s talk over dinner.” Dante put his hand against the small of Natalia’s back and guided her to the dining area. He pulled out her chair while Pietro sat across from her. Dante sat

to her right.

“Natalia tells me you’re a musician. What do you play?”

“The violin,” Dante said. He shuffled his papers and set them on the floor to make room for his plate. “I was composing a piece for Natalia when you arrived.”

Natalia looked up from her salad in surprise. She swallowed and then said, “For me?”

Dante smiled and placed his hand over hers, and Pietro said, “You must play it for us after dinner.”

“I would love to hear it!” Pink crept over Natalia’s cheeks, making her even more beautiful to Dante.

“Of course.” He looked at Pietro. “You work at the university too?”

“Yes, I teach a few classes, but my main focus is research.”

“I’ve been reading about the recent advances in transplants. Are you doing any research in that area?” Dante asked.

“Yes, actually. How much has Natalia told you?”

“Not much,” Natalia said, “because you haven’t told me much.”

“Well, we’re not ready to advertise it yet, but we’re pursuing the idea of head transplants.”

Dante placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward, eager to hear more.

“We’re very close to receiving final approval to move ahead. I’m thinking it will only be weeks, if that. And it could be as soon as tomorrow.”

“What could be?” Dante asked. “What’s been holding you up?”

“There’s a lot of controversy and some special circumstances. As you probably know, a lot of people already donate their organs upon death, and many even choose to donate their entire body for research. In the past, most complete human bodies have been donated to universities for the medical students to use for practice.”

Dante nodded. “That makes sense. What better way for med students to learn the trade?” He looked at Natalia, and she smiled back at him. “I wouldn’t want a new doctor performing surgery on me unless he’s had quite a bit of practice.”

She nodded in agreement.

Pietro continued, “Exactly! But there’s a difference for us. The bodies used as cadavers can sit in the freezers for a while before they’re examined, but for our purpose, they’ll need to be fresh. And to be legally protected, we need to be sure the donors are willing participants.”

“Willing?” Natalia asked. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“I mean we need to know their final wishes. What do they mean when they say they want to donate their body to science? Are we all in agreement? If we’re not careful, close family may tell us that a head transplant wasn’t what their loved one had in mind.”

“But it’s not really a head transplant, now is it?” Dante said.

Natalia and Pietro turned to look at him.

“I mean, it’s really more of a full body transplant, wouldn’t you say? If a person’s body is damaged beyond repair, but his brain is in good working order, what he needs is a new body. Any needed organ or part, right?” Dante reached into his back pocket and pulled out the envelope.

“Dante!” Natalia laughed. “Do you always carry that with you?”

“It’s important for people to know.” He shrugged and handed it to Pietro who read it over.

“This is fantastic. Would you bring this to the university? I’d love to get you into the system—just in case, you understand. We have a database. It’s new, you’d only be the second. The

other man who has expressed an interest is a quadriplegic, but it's important to get started. We'll need to take some blood tests and make sure we have everything we need to match you to the correct donor in the event of an untimely death."

"Of course!" Dante was all smiles.

"Okay, this is getting a little weird," Natalia said. "I mean, here I am watching you two grin about the possibility of Dante's death. What's wrong with us?"

"Nothing, dear cousin. We are merely talking about medical research. Imagine how much we could learn!"

Dante jumped in as well. "Oh, I have wondered about it! I've wondered about it a lot actually. I mean, just think of some questions that have plagued humans since the beginning of time. Is there a soul?"

"And if there is," continued Pietro, "where does it reside, in the heart or the brain?"

"Maybe the soul runs throughout every cell of our being," Natalia chimed in. "Maybe it runs through our nervous system."

"Another thing I've often wondered about," Dante cut in, "is muscle memory."

"What do you mean?" Natalia asked.

"I think I know where he's going with this," Pietro said. "May I try to clarify, see if I'm right?"

Dante nodded eagerly. From all the strange looks he'd gotten whenever he tried to discuss any of this, he was glad to finally have an agreeable audience.

"You're talking about actions that have become so commonplace with an individual, that they're almost instinctive."

"Yes, exactly," Dante said.

"We already know that nerve signals move at an extraordinary rate along synaptic pathways. Little things called dendrites actively pass messages from one to the next until the brain receives the information or until the muscle receiving direction from the brain, does as it's instructed."

Natalia nodded. "Yes, it's starting to come back to me. I know I've learned this. So just as dendrites can wither and die if they're never used, they can also be strengthened, much like a muscle."

"You've got it!" Dante put his arm around her. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

She playfully pushed him away.

Pietro grinned. "On that note, weren't you jotting down a bunch of them? Writing a song for my cousin, you said."

Natalia groaned at the pun.

Dante looked at her with a thoughtful expression. "It's not quite finished yet. Give me a few minutes? I think I've been inspired to write the ending."

"Sure. Natalia, I'll help you clean up while Romeo here finishes that piece."

Dante took the staff paper and a pencil up to the rooftop terrace. He scanned Trastevere Square for a moment before looking down at the paper and completing the song. The first half was what he gave all the girls, but his feelings for Natalia had changed during the course of one dinner. He now felt ashamed about the first part of the piece, but he pushed that thought away as he realized that part of the song was about who he had been. This new part, the part he had just written, was about who he wanted to be now that she was in his life. He took the music back to his living room where Natalia and Pietro were sipping tea.

They watched silently as he picked up his violin and bow. Dante glanced at the sheet music

before handing it to Natalia. Then he walked over to the window, closed his eyes and began to play from memory. The familiar and sweet melody filled the room. When he was done, he returned to his surroundings, slowly lowering the instrument to his side and opening his eyes. Natalia stood up slowly, went to him and kissed him gently on the lips, while Pietro broke into applause.

“Wow! Natalia didn’t tell me I was in the presence of greatness. That was truly amazing, Dante.”

Dante smiled and bowed to Pietro.

A few weeks later, Dante woke in the early morning hours. He glanced at the glowing numerals of the clock on the nightstand — 02:38. He reached for Natalia and snuggled up against her. After what felt like an eternity, he looked at the clock — 02:43. Closing his eyes he tried again — 02:55. It was no use. Carefully, he climbed out of bed so as not to wake her, got a cool drink of water in the kitchen, then went to the living room where he removed his violin and bow from their case. He sought the solitude of the rooftop and began to play in the cool night air. As notes soared, Dante’s mind finally relaxed.

The soft sound of the stairwell door opening caught the far reaches of his mind. He continued to play, but now, for an audience. As the horsehair thrummed against the strings, the notes climbed higher, and then fell, cascading against each other, tumbling over and over again. Eventually, the music calmed, and slowed, and stopped.

Dante opened his eyes. Natalia was leaning against the wall near the edge of the roof, looking out at the stars. When she turned, he saw tears glistening in the corners of her eyes.

“That was—haunting, I guess. Disturbing even, yet beautiful. What’s going through your head, I wonder?” She stepped closer and ran one hand through his hair, then cupped his cheek. He leaned against her warmth, closing his eyes once again, but opening them when she spoke. “Really, I’d like to know. What were you thinking about?”

Dante paused, trying to decide how to respond. She already knew he was in love with her. She practically lived here now, but the phone calls, the angry glares he received on the street... had she noticed? He’d hoped the others would just fade away, but some of them were taking his distance and silence harder than he’d expected. He settled on a safer topic. “I’m just wondering why I haven’t heard anything from Pietro in the past couple of weeks. Have you seen him at work? Talked to him?”

“No, we work in separate buildings, and from the news I’ve been reading online, I expect he’s been busy. I told you about the rabbit, didn’t I?”

Dante nodded.

“So why are you worried? Pietro has everything he needs from you. And the work they’re doing is in preparation for an actual human head transplant. By the time it really happens, they’ll have had numerous trials with other mammals, and that’s the way it should be. Remember what you said about medical students needing to practice on cadavers before doing their first operation?”

“Yes, I know this is much the same. I just—. Sometimes I wonder about destiny. I have this feeling that I’m supposed to be involved somehow.”

“And you are! You’re in the database, but—.” She looked at him for a moment, pondering. “You don’t have to be the first, you know. It would be better if you weren’t. Let them practice and perfect their skills so when your time comes, hopefully a long time from now, doctors will

be ready to help you live longer.”

He stared off into the distance.

“Dante, you’re only in the database as a precaution against death, aren’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

Although that line of discussion had effectively steered Natalia away from what was really on Dante’s mind, his thoughts were once again a mess of silly string.

“Let’s go back to bed,” she said.

He allowed Natalia to take his hand and lead him back to the warm, dark bedroom. She snuggled up against him and quickly fell asleep while his mind continued to wander.

Natalia strolled into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee from the steaming pot. After adding a little sugar, she carried it up to the patio where she found Dante sitting in one of the wrought iron chairs. She sat across from him and took a sip of coffee.

“I thought I might find you up here. How long have you been awake?” She glanced at the early morning sky. Gray clouds hung over the city.

“I’m not sure. What time is it?” Dark circles ringed his eyes.

“Just after five o’clock.”

The phone calls had become more frequent in the past few days, and Dante had begun to lose sleep. ‘Bill collectors,’ he’d told Natalia, ‘sales calls, wrong numbers.’

You have too much on your mind,” Natalia said. She winked at him. “And I have just the remedy for that.” She was a vision, even with her hair all mussed from a good night’s sleep.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I have enough energy right now.”

“I know, and that’s not what I meant.”

“What then?”

“I’ll call in sick, and we’ll go back to bed for the morning. You need to sleep.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I can sleep.”

“You’ll rest then. I insist,” she said before he could argue further. “And after lunch, we’ll go to the Vatican, look at the artwork, take a tour, just walk. You need a day to relax and get away from your worries.” Before returning to the bedroom, Natalia made Dante hand over his phone, and she turned it off.

Throughout the morning, Dante dozed while Natalia curled up beside him and read a novel. Early that afternoon, they rode a crowded bus to the Vatican. “I think we should take a cab home,” Dante whispered to Natalia.

“What? And miss all the friendly people?” she whispered back.

They shifted further away from a guy who sorely needed some deodorant, but it did little good. Dante grinned at her. “Exactly!”

Michelangelo’s paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel calmed Dante’s soul, but the people crowding around them grated on his nerves. “Let’s go to the gardens,” he suggested quietly. The mazes of low hedges soothed his frayed nerves some, and the fountains helped even more. For quite some time, they sat and just listened to the falling water.

When Dante felt better, they began to stroll. They were on a secluded path between one garden and the next when a voice from behind said, “Dante? Dante Marando?”

As one, they stopped and turned. Protectively, Dante put his arm around Natalia’s shoulders and pulled her close. “Who wants to know?”

“So you’re the one?” The man shook his head. “You? What could she possibly see in you?”

"I'm afraid you have the wrong man. I don't know who you're talking..."

The man cut him off. "Carmela was mine, but you took her away from me. I dealt with it, moved on, but then I got a call. No—" The man shook his head. "Now she calls me at all hours of the day and night, in tears. You completely ruined her. And for what? Her?" He jabbed his finger at Natalia then reached behind his back and pulled a gun from the waistband of his jeans.

"What are...?" Dante began.

"Shut up!"

"Who is Carmela?" Natalia whispered.

But Dante was completely focused on the man. He unwrapped his arm from around Natalia and held out his hands in a 'stop' motion. "I agree. Carmela is yours. She's all yours. Please put the gun down."

"No." The man shook his head sadly, the gun held loosely in his hand. "I can't do that. Just look at you. You're pathetic. Who'd you steal this one from?" He pointed the gun at Natalia.

"No one!" Dante shook his head vehemently.

Natalia gulped, then said, "He didn't steal me from anyone. And he's all mine, not Carmela's."

But the man had already returned his attention to Dante. "You're one of those, aren't you?" he asked, in a plaintive voice. "You're just gonna keep doing this to people. I'm sorry, but I can't let you do that. Not anymore. It stops now." He lifted the gun and aimed between Dante's wide brown eyes.

Before Dante could blink, a blast shattered the air.

Natalia screamed and fell to her knees, covered in Dante's blood. Bits of his skull clung to her hair. Shaking uncontrollably, her brain went on autopilot, as another part of her, a deeper part, took control. She pulled out her phone and hit the third number on speed dial.

"Pietro," she said in a flat voice. "Something has happened, and..." she gagged. "He's here. He's ready for you. Get over here and help me. Please, save Dante, if you can."

Pietro snipped the last thread and stepped back. "Well, that's it. Now we wait." He glanced at the observation window where his beautiful raven haired cousin, Natalia, stood watching.

A grueling 36 hours after they had begun, the surgery was complete. Sergio's heartbeat was strong and his breathing regular, but his eyes remained closed.

Pietro's team remained in their last positions. Some leaned against counters, while a few sat right on the hard tile floor, watching and waiting.

Twenty minutes later, Sergio's eyes opened for just a moment. "Did it work?" he asked, before falling back asleep.

During the weeks leading to a full recovery, many people came to visit Sergio. Some wanted to question him, others wanted to test him or see the miracle for themselves. One young woman simply came to keep him company. Natalia told him she worked in the engineering department as a research assistant. It was her cousin who had been one of the leading doctors on his case.

Out of everyone, even beyond that of his family who had never believed he would walk again, hers were the visits he cherished the most. He'd come to trust her, to open up to her.

About a month after the surgery, Natalia gently rapped on the door.

Sergio's physical therapist opened it and smiled down at her. "You've got my schedule timed down to the second, haven't you?"

She blushed. "I think it's probably the time of day he could use the most encouragement."

Don't you? After all, you are pretty hard on him."

"It's my job and will lead to a quicker recovery. Still, you're right about the encouragement. He needs that too."

"I heard that!" Sergio called.

Natalia hurried into the room and found Sergio sitting at a small round table in the corner. His face was flushed. She sat in the chair across from him. "Was it a hard workout?"

"It's nothing I can't handle."

"I'm sure it's not."

"It's not any more difficult than...have I told you about the time I biked up a mountain trail?"

She grinned. "You mean that time you biked up and then down the mountain?"

"Oh, you mean the time I almost got hit by a car because my chain fell off, and I couldn't stop at the bottom? No, that was a different time."

Natalia laughed. "I love your stories, but I hope you'll be more careful now."

His smile disappeared. "Yes, I will. I only hope I can convince you to go hiking with me when I get out of here."

"I think that can be arranged," she said.

The next day, she was back again. Natalia smiled at Sergio as he walked across the room to greet her. "That's good. Where's your physical therapist?"

"Not coming. Your cousin said I should begin practicing on my own, daily. He was firm about that last part. The physical therapist will be checking in on a weekly basis as long as I continue to make progress."

"Would you like to try going farther today? Take a short walk in the hall?"

"Sure." He huffed as he lowered himself into a chair. "Just give me a few minutes."

Natalia sighed and looked out the window. She kept looking for signs of Dante in Sergio, but so far had seen nothing to indicate he was there. Her gaze returned to Sergio's dark eyes.

'Dante? Are you in there somewhere?' She shook her head. Of course he wasn't, because what had occurred wasn't really a head transplant, it was a full body transplant. Sergio had needed a healthy body, and now he had one. The soul clearly resided in the brain, she decided, thinking back to Pietro's and Dante's dinner conversation.

Then her thoughts drifted completely to Dante. The truth was, Natalia couldn't get certain thoughts out of her mind. What had the man with the gun meant? Who was Carmela? Had Dante been cheating on her? Maybe that's what all of those phone calls had been about. What about Angela? Natalia hadn't had the nerve to go to the box office and ask her straight out. She wondered if Angela even knew what had happened to Dante.

"Hey. Hey!"

Natalia turned away from the window and focused on Sergio.

"There you go again, drifting away. Are you all right? Is there anything I can help you with?"

Natalia shook her head. "Nothing time can't heal," she said softly.

"Sometimes it can help to talk."

"Not yet," she said. "Maybe someday, but not yet."

"When you're ready then."

She nodded.

"I get to go home tomorrow," Sergio announced.

“Really? That’s fantastic!”

Sergio lifted himself out of the chair and took a few steps toward her. When he reached her side, he handed her a slip of paper. “That’s my address and my phone number. I hope you’ll continue to visit.”

She nodded. “I would like that.”

“So, are you going to play for me?” he asked.

“What?”

Sergio indicated the violin case at her feet.

“Oh,” Natalia glanced down. She’d almost forgotten she had brought that along. It was Dante’s favorite possession. Somehow, it only seemed right that it should go to Sergio. “It’s for you. A gift.” She lifted the case and handed it to him.

Sergio set it on the windowsill and opened the lid. “Thank you, but I don’t play. Haven’t had the opportunity to learn.” He plucked at the strings and picked up the bow. Twisting the little knob at the end seemed natural to him as he tightened the horsehairs. “Is it in tune?”

“I wouldn’t know.” She smiled. “I don’t play either.”

“Well, let me give it a try.” He lifted the instrument to his chin, amazed at how natural it felt, and began to play. A sweet melody filled the room.

Natalia gulped. It was as if Dante had returned from the great beyond, but that wasn’t possible unless—. Again, she recalled his discussion with Pietro. “Muscle memory,” she whispered too softly for Sergio to hear. Suddenly, the song was cut short, and she looked up in surprise. “Why did you stop?” she asked. “You were just getting to the best part.”

He shook his head in amazement. “That’s all I can seem to remember, but it’s so strange. It’s not really a memory, it can’t be, but it feels like one.” He looked down at his hands, clutching the violin and bow. “I know I’ve never heard that song before. It’s just, playing it felt, right.”

S.L. Wallace is an upper elementary Montessori teacher and lifelong writer who is a descendant of the famous William Wallace. Like him, she believes in freedom and independence. Unlike him, she fights her battles with the pen.

Other books by S.L. Wallace:

Reliance on Citizens trilogy:

- Price of a Bounty
- Canvas Skies
- Heart of Humanity

Retrospection

Connect with S.L. Wallace at her official Author Website, slwallace.com