



Tales of a
TENACIOUS
TENOR

Robert P. Mitchell

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Written by Robert P Mitchell

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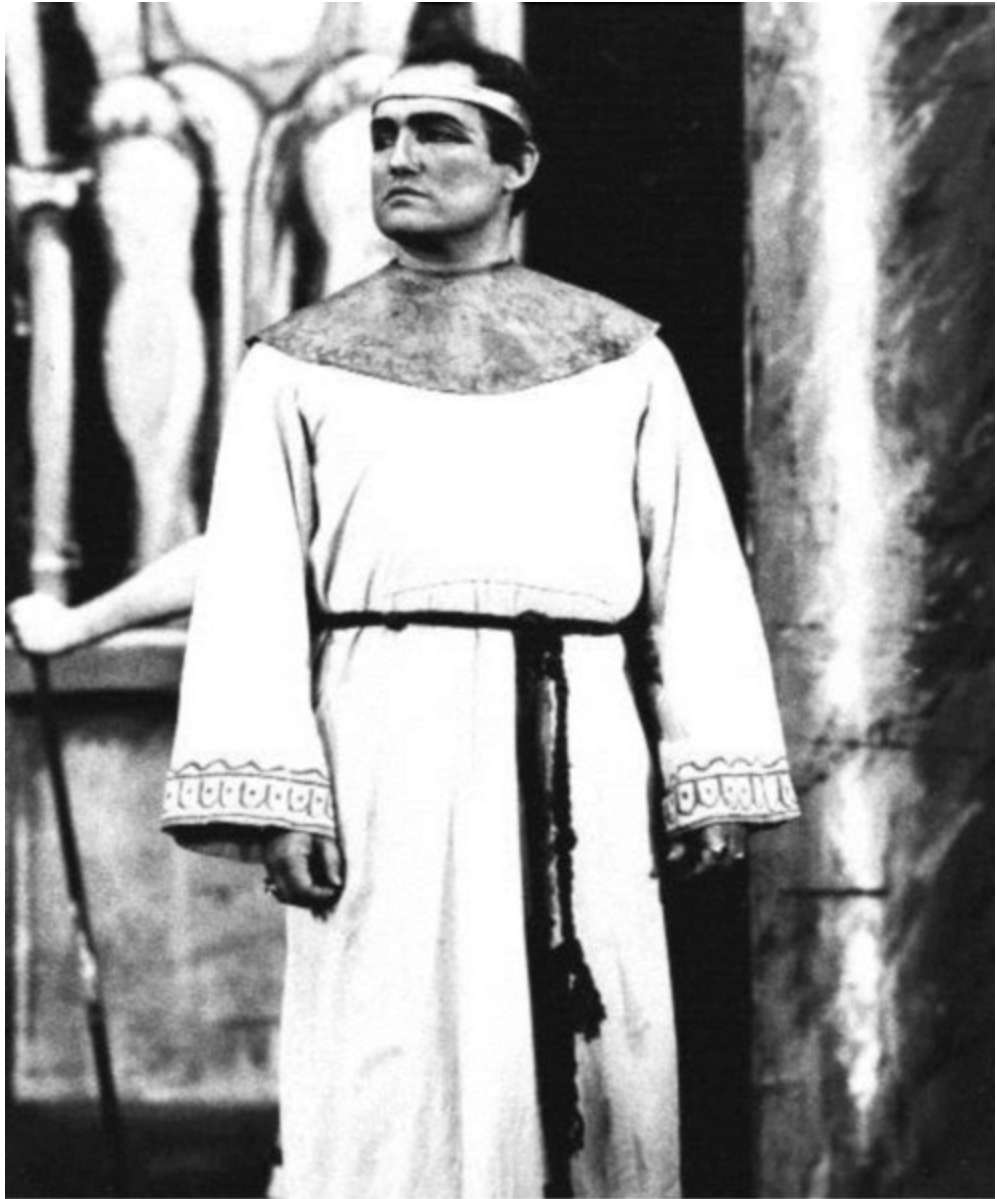
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DEDICATION

**To all those that asked,
“Why aren’t you singing at the Met?”**



(Credit Konstanin Moskalenko for all bxw Amato performance photos). Robert Mitchell as Radames in Verdi's *AIDA* , Act 4, Scene 1

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Prologue

How It All Started—Mario Lanza

Opera? Ya mean like Pavaroddy?
Yeah-h... Somp'm like 'at.

July, 1954

As I was about to run out the back door of the kitchen, Mom called to me.

“Happy birthday, Robert!”

They didn't call her “Cricket” for nothing, a name she loved. Maybe she was small of stature, but she could stand tall when she needed to. Like the time she chased my older brother Johnny and me up the narrow back steps with a hefty dust pan brush, whacking us on the behind, or on whatever part she could reach. Like crickets, Mom could make a lot of noise. That's why we kids used to let her take on Dad for us. But this morning I hardly noticed behind her apron that she was wearing loose-fitting slacks and a brown blouse, not her usual kitchen attire. The blouse complemented her brown eyes—all us Mitchells had brown eyes and brown hair. Her hair was neatly pinned back without her usual bandana.

I stopped, turned, pulled out the sides of my blue checkered swimming trunks, and bowed gallantly to her. “Thanks, Mom. Hey! I'm fifteen today and I'm going swimming at Hanna Park!”

“But Dad's showing movies over in Bellefonte.” It was the fifteenth of July, all right, and she must have already decided she was taking me to the movies today.

“Not today, Mom. It's too nice out. My buddies 'll be there.” This day brightened my spirits in this muggy,

sweltering summer in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania.

From our house at 83 Susquehanna Avenue, Bellefonte was a forty-five minute trip.

“Oh, I forgot. Dad’s showing the *Black Lagoon* today, isn’t he?” Remembering that Dad was showing a new horror film all my friends wanted to see, I suddenly realized I would be the first to see it, so I changed my mind and quickly replied, “Okay, I’ll go.”

Before she could stop me to explain what she had in mind, I bounded up the stairs three at a time to change into my denim shorts and my old red T-shirt. By the time I came back down, Mom had shed her trusty apron and was already waiting behind the steering wheel of the old, family Plymouth.

As we drove up the “Altoona Road” (State Route 2022) Mom said rather sullenly, “I’m not taking you to a horror picture.” She turned to me with a big smile, “Do you know what’s playing in the other theater in Bellefonte?”

I had no idea, but I knew the “other” theater was the fancy one in town. When his printing business was slow, Dad worked occasionally at the “second” theater Johnny and I called the “ratty” one, with seats like in school auditoriums, the popcorn and candy came from a vending machine, no ushers, and the bathrooms stank. But they showed the movies we liked.

Without waiting for me to reply she added, “The Student Prince.”

I looked at her and started to say, “The what?” but immediately realized it was the latest Mario Lanza movie. Actually, I did want to see it, but at the moment I wasn’t in the mood for a romantic love story. I wanted the thrill of a monster in a black lagoon chasing pretty girls around, and to laugh at the hero’s side kick. “I don’t want to watch a sappy love story,” I replied and looked out my window. After all, it’s MY birthday today, I thought to myself.

“But Robert, you said you couldn’t wait to hear Mario sing again,” she cooed, while nudging me in the ribs. She knew he was my singing idol, and gave me that oh-come-on-now-Robert-you-know-you-want-to-see-it look, a look that always worked on Dad. I liked to pretend it didn’t sway me, but I caved in much quicker than I ever thought I would.

“Oh-h...all right, Mom... But this better be good!”

From the first song, “Summertime in Heidelberg,” I was hooked. As the love story began to unfold, I hunched down in my seat so Mom couldn’t see the tears streaming down my face. If she told Johnny and our two sisters how gushy I was, I’d be dead meat. Kathie, the barmaid, was played by the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, Ann Blythe. When she was on screen I couldn’t take my eyes off her. When she and Mario sang together, oh how I wanted to be in his shoes!

Mom never said a word about my fidgeting: running my hands through my hair, looking away from the screen, using the crook of my elbow to dry my cheeks. But she knew. Mothers always do.

When we walked out of the theater, she smiled, but didn’t say a word. I was lost in my own adolescent romantic fantasies, not to mention Mario’s voice still ringing in my ears. As we walked across the parking lot to the car, I fell back of her a little so she couldn’t see my tear-stained face and red-puffed eyes. Most of the ride home, I looked out the window as the wind whistled by. At first we didn’t talk, but then, she broke the silence.

“What did you think of his voice?” she asked, trying not to notice my puffy eyes.

Still looking out of the window trying to un-puff my eyes in the breeze, I said without looking at her, “Terrific! ... I never heard him on a big screen like that before.” I peeked at her reflection in the windshield to try to measure where this conversation was headed.

“Wouldn’t you like to sing like that?”

Abruptly I turned toward her, blew through my lips, and whispered, “Are you kidding?”

She smiled that familiar Mona Lisa smile and then looked straight ahead. “Just keep at it, that’s all.”

I stared at her for a moment and then looked out the window again, shaking my head. Mom, the eternal wishful thinker. Meanwhile my emotions bounced back and forth like a billiard ball, from I can do this! to, No I can’t! Dad’s favorite prediction resounded in my head: You’ll never amount to a tinker’s damn! But Mom had unknowingly fueled a fire in me.

Sensing my delicate mood, she tried to distract me from my thoughts with idle chatter the rest of the ride home. That evening after supper, while they were watching TV in the living room, I came down the back stairs and tip-toed out the kitchen door to the backyard—I needed to be alone for a while. As a child my prayers were pretty much rote, like, “Now I lay me down to sleep...,” but this night my heart was bursting. Tears streamed uncontrollably down my cheeks. I looked up at the star-glistened sky, trying to frame a prayer with my arms raised to God. No words came to me. Suddenly my passion took over, and out loud my soul raised my innermost thoughts to God for me.

“Dear God, I wanna sing ... I gotta sing, like that, like Mario ... Please, God ... help me!”

Chapter 1

High School—Early Training

1939 - 1957

We Mitchells were a singing family. We sang in church, in school and at home and on holidays. Mom would sit at the piano and call, “Com’on you guys. It’s Christmas. Time to sing.”

With glad smiles, we’d gather around and sing to her accompaniment, be it Christmas carols, Easter hymns, Thanksgiving songs, whatever the holiday. We each had our own part to sing. My two elder sisters, Joan and Margaret (“Cissy”) sang alto, Mom sang soprano, my brother, Johnny, sang tenor, and Dad and I—the baby of the family—sang bass and baritone respectively.

“Hey, Mom, let’s sing “Winter Wonderland,” I would suggest at Christmas.

“I can’t play that one,” Mom would say with a sly smile that said, “Now Robert, you know better than to ask for something I can’t play.”

“How about, ‘Silent Night?’”

“Now you’re cookin’.”

We certainly didn’t compare with the Trapp Family Singers, but we made a reasonably good sound, but more importantly, it brought us together as a family.

My parents were polar opposites. Mom provided the cheery atmosphere in the household with her sense of humor and music. She had a mischievous streak and loved to laugh. As she hung the laundry or swept the floors she sang, usually old Gospel tunes she grew up with. Dad, on the other hand, was all business. The print shop and making

money consumed him. But even he at holiday time could be persuaded to join in. His favorite song was an old Gospel hymn, "Ivory Palaces," which he could plunk out on the piano with his index finger—that and "Carolina Moon." Mom could get a smile out of him better than anyone by encouraging him to sing. But he could never let his hair down because he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, worrying about money and how to feed his family. He seemed to get really uptight around Christmas when business was slow. Other times when business picked up, he could be downright jolly.

That was especially true in the summertime. Mom would walk into the room and say, "Anybody for a picnic?" our favorite family pastime—besides singing.

"Yeah, yeah! Where to?" we kids would yell.

Dad would say, "Just a minute! Let me finish this job...."

He loved to drive us to all the parks in central Pennsylvania for a cookout. His passion was grilling burgers while Johnny and I played cowboys and Indians in the woods. I really don't know what Joan and Cissy did all that while. We waited for his "Come and get it before I throw it all out," before we'd run out of the woods to gobble down some picnic chow. Then we were right back in the woods to resume our games.

Joan, the eldest of us kids, took after Mom with her perky sense of humor and good cheer. When our neighbor, Sammy Smith picked on me, Joan would run out of the house and yell, "You leave my brother alone, Sammy Smith." If he persisted, she'd tackle him and hold him down until I got away. Sammy was twice my size, but not Joan. She was his age and a tomboy who later majored in physical education. He was no match for her. I never thanked her for her sisterly devotion to me.

Cis was the serious one, very studious and a really good student. Johnny wasn't dumb by any means, but he was

always getting himself into trouble in school, and his grades showed it.

Like Cis, I was serious and very conscientious. I always had good grades. When I brought a report card home, Mom eyed it for anything that wasn't an A (=excellent).

"What did David get?" was her usual question. My best friend, David Wolfe, excelled in all subjects (except gym), and he was her measuring rod for my success. If she saw a B, she would say, "Why didn't you get a A? What did David get?"

"I don't know what David got, Mom, but he probably did get an A." If she pursued the issue, I soon learned to deflect her. "Hey, Mom! I got a solo in chorus this week. Maybe I can sing it in church." That usually did the trick, so I didn't have to stand there and defend myself about my grades. I always did the best I could, and that should have been enough. But it never was.

Mom always used to say about my desire to sing: Just keep at it. At what? To sing like Mario I needed singing lessons. She hadn't a clue. And Dad? All he cared about was "the business" he wanted me to take over some day. Did I care about that? Well, sometimes I did think seriously about it, and it wasn't just to please him, but when I tried to discuss it with him, what happened? We ended up fighting about it.

He would yell at me that I was too green to tell him anything about business, and I'd counter that maybe he should try living in the twentieth century for a change, instead of in the ancient printing guilds.

"What's wrong with the guild system?" he would roar.

I'd start to walk away. What was the use of telling him there's nothing wrong with the guilds? That wasn't the point. We just happened to live in the twentieth century, not the fourteenth. Maybe we could have discussed how to bring the business into the twentieth century...?

“There you go spending my money again!” he would shout. “We can’t afford...!”

Here we go again about the money. I think every conversation I ever had with my dad went round in circles and ended with money talk. We just couldn’t get on the same page. I would go upstairs to my room or take a ride on my bike to try to clear my head.

If only I could sing like Lanza, every girl would throw herself at my feet. Singing’s my ticket to feeling good about myself, and a good future. But how can I get started...?

Then Dad learned I was serious about becoming a singer.

Dad had a tough life. His father died when he was about thirteen or so, and Grandma raised him by herself. He had a nervous breakdown of some sort, and they wouldn’t take him in the army—at least that’s how I understand it. I saw in youthful pictures that he was thin and quite handsome with his Clark Gable moustache and full head of hair. But I guess everything he tried didn’t work out for him, so he became a very bitter man. He had become rather heavy, his face deeply lined and rather pasty. But he still had a full head of hair, and not a single grey one.

“You and your goddamn pipe dreams! You’ll never amount to a damn thing! Get a real job! You’ll never do what you want to do, anyhow. You’ll do what you have to do. That’s life! You’d be better off in the Army! They’ll kick some sense into you.”

That August I worked for Dad setting type in his print shop. He had bought two new presses and installed them in what used to be the dining room—it faced the side street, accessible for deliveries. He had taught me how to set type, a “modern” eighteenth century technique. While I set type he ran the presses. We listened to the radio while we worked, programs like Arthur Godfrey Time, a morning variety show. We enjoyed the singing, the antics, and laughed together.

Dad could be a caring teacher one minute, and a roaring lion the next. He loved to lecture, or what I called “pontificate” about money (making a living), politics and religion. I guess my problem was that I never learned Mom’s trick: just let him ramble until he runs out of steam. Instead, I argued with him. At first he loved my jabs so he could further expand on his ideas. But if you showed him how he was wrong when he really was, he’d go ballistic.

There was an evening after supper as we worked in the shop, he was holding forth about religion. Suddenly I remembered I had a rehearsal with Mrs. Kamp, the church organist. I got up and removed my apron. Immediately Dad yelled at me, “Wait a minute! I’m still talking to you. Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I have a rehearsal with Mrs. Kamp.”

“What rehearsal? I’ve got to get these funeral cards out for Johnny Yost tonight. Did you finish setting them up?”

“Ah, no, Dad.”

He slammed down the type he was installing in the printer and turned to me with a face like a banshee, “Goddamn it, Robert! I told you before we have to get them done toni-...”

Continuing to face the type case where I’d been working, I cut him off. “Dad, I can’t let Mrs. Kamp down.” Swinging my chair around to him, I continued, “I’ll do it in the morn-...”

“To hell with Mrs. Kamp!” stamping his foot on the floor. “Don’t you know what’s important in life? She can find anybody to sing her ... music.” Now shaking his hands in the air, “How’re you ever gonna amount to anything in life if you keep running after that fool’s errand you call ‘singin’?’ You’ll be scrubbin’ floors all your life!” His face burned scarlet.

By this time I felt my face burning like his, and my chest tighten, so I turned to him face to face and shouted back, “You don’t even pay me for this lousy job!” and turned on

my heel and rushed out of the room as I angrily threw my apron over the type case.

When I got outside, there was Mom waiting in the car to drive me to church. It was already getting dark. She could see in my face that something was wrong. Before she asked I told her about the fight we had just had and how I walked out on him.

She sighed in exasperation. Her face paled, even in the dark. I guess she knew she was in for it with Dad, and she would have to run interference for me, as she has done for all of us kids throughout their married life. Mom was the family peacemaker, a role she took on herself, but I don't think she liked it very much.

"That wasn't very nice," she commented, meaning me, I think. I couldn't be sure whether she was on his side or mine. The fact that she was ready to drive me to church I thought meant she was on my side. But Mom was afraid of Dad, so perhaps I had put her in a bad position. I guess she knew about my rehearsal, but didn't know Dad expected me to work that night.

"What am I supposed to do, Mom?" shaking my hands imploringly toward her. "He doesn't give a damn about me."

She shook her head. "Daddy loves you. He's grooming you to take over the business someday."

"Yeah, like he groomed Joan, and tried with Cissy and Johnny, right? That leaves me, the last of his progeny. What if I don't want the stupid business? Besides, I can't work with him. He drives me nuts. What about my music? My singing? I thought you liked my singing."

"You can always do that on the side."

What? I thought you wanted me to sing...

Mom's support of my singing was always a bit schizophrenic. Singing in church and school was fine. And she loved the idea that I wanted to sing like Mario. Yet when I got serious about a career, she clammed up. She knew Dad didn't like the idea, so she probably felt she was in the

middle. I didn't know. She wouldn't talk about it. I always wanted to scream, but could only sputter. My thoughts became so jumbled all I could do was shut myself down.

This night I had no retort for her. The drive to church felt like being in Johnny Yost's funeral hearse. Mom waited for me in the car. She didn't even come in to hear me sing.

On the way home we talked about the ups and downs of Mrs. Kamp's health. She's in her eighties, after all, I kept thinking to myself. But I loved that lady and felt guilty for thinking like that. Is Mom in my camp or not? Is there anyone who'll support and help me?

In my lone hours for the remainder of that summer of '54, whether in my room or in the woods, I talked to God, agonizing over and over what I should do. God, why shouldn't I believe in my dream? Waiting for God takes patience, never my strong suit. I may as well wait for Godot. Sometimes I was feeling up, sometimes down, while other times everyday pressures gobbled my attention. Before I knew it, the summer had ebbed away.

In September after school started, I had no time for the print shop. As I rode my bike from school to my new paying job at the drugstore, I decided I had to prove Dad was wrong. But, by the time I got to my post behind the tobacco counter, I again had second thoughts about singing.

If I can't learn to sing like Mario, how can I prove the Old Man wrong?

I knew I had to come up with a plan to learn how to sing—properly.

As I grew older, choir directors always put me in the baritone section. But the more I learned about music, playing in the band and later studying the piano, the more I felt something was amiss about my voice: I couldn't sing the lower notes. That was when I started to think I was really in fact a tenor. And Johnny sang tenor, so, whatever he did I wanted to do. He was my big brother, after all.

I turned to Mrs. Graves, the choral teacher in high school, the only person I knew who taught singing. She offered to give me lessons for free, not because she believed in me, but that she saw how much I wanted to sing.

During one lesson she said, "Bob, I know how much you want to sing, but you should think of singing as a second career, an avocation, not a vocation. You can find all sorts of venues where people will enjoy hearing you. But as a career? There are too many struggling artists out there looking to make careers. Your chances are slim, believe me." She shook her head decisively with her lips pressed together.

I wanted to say to her, "But Mrs. Graves, I at least want to try. What's the harm in that?" But I kept my peace and went away more discouraged than ever. "Nobody cares what I want," I whispered to no one in particular as I slunk down the hall.

Summer, 1955

Up to this point I thought of singing in terms of Mario. To me, opera singers were large women with horns on their heads brandishing spears in one hand and large shields in the other. Or maybe a fat little man decked out in a tuxedo, squeezing out his high notes. Lanza was different. He's what I wanted to be.

My introduction to opera came from across Susquehanna Avenue where the Fontana family lived. Mr. Fontana was an amateur opera singer, quite well known in Lock Haven. The Mitchell family didn't know about such things; we didn't move in those circles. I had no idea Mr. Fontana was an opera singer until Johnny told me so. In fact, Johnny was taking lessons with Mr. Fontana. I decided to check Mr. Fontana out for myself.

If you saw him on the street, you'd never take Mr. Fontana for an opera singer. He worked as a signal repairman for the Pennsylvania Railroad, always in his dirty, oil-stained, blue-denim overalls. He was a tall man with a

ruddy, yet dark outdoor complexion, unruly salt and pepper hair, topped with a striped railroad hat that must have been handed down from a nineteenth century predecessor. His hands were large and strong and perpetually black from fixing greasy railroad signals, I guessed. He wore thick glasses, giving him the curious appearance of a professor who'd taken a wrong turn.

I was excited the day I was to talk to him about singing. Maybe he could help me learn to sing like Mario and launch me into a fabulous singing career. My imagination soared as I crossed Susquehanna Avenue, imagining myself in a dashing costume, brandishing a sword at some foe, singing for the hand of Ann Blythe, who soon joined me in a romantic duet.

My dream abruptly vaporized as I stepped across the well-worn threshold of the Fontana front door. The reality of smoky, acrid air tickling my nose and burning my throat shook me right out of my reverie. My eyes burned as though I had just walked into a forest fire. It came from the wood burning stove in the kitchen, which was Mrs. Fontana's well-guarded domain.

What did they burn in there? Old, worn-out boots?

As my eyes adjusted to the dark room, shadows of old country house and well-used furniture crowding the room began to take shape before me. My eyes swept round the room, wondering if anyone was home.

An upright piano stood against the wall to my left on the far side of the door to the kitchen. Mr. Fontana, tools dangling from an elaborate tool belt, sat rather agitatedly on the piano bench facing the door waiting for me as planned. Noticing him, I smiled and was about to say hello.

Before I could speak, without a word, he abruptly stood, tools clunking against the piano with resounding reverberations through the piano's sound board. He grabbed his cap with his right hand, fingers automatically finding their previously grease-smudged marks on the small visor,

and as he turned toward the piano, he slapped the hat down on top of it and motioned me forward with his left hand, by this time, his back to me.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Fontana, for seeing me today. You can’t imagine how much I want to become a tenor...”

“You want to be a tenor? Have you ever sung tenor?”

I slowly shook my head.

“If you want to be a tenor you have to be able to sing this,” he said, pointing to music on the piano rack. He opened to the page that would be my test and ordered me to sing the line of music indicated by a disturbingly greasy index finger.

What’s this? I wondered to myself.

He switched hands and began thumping the notes on the piano with that same right hand index finger as he pointed to the Italian words in the score with a similarly black-stained left index finger, smudging the page as he did so. It was well worn and quite brown anyway, so he didn’t even notice.

“Know Italian? ... No? Why not? You said you were a tenor. Well, sing any words you want,” he bellowed in his stentorian baritone. “I want to hear your range.”

Range?

I tried, but now tight as a hangman’s noose, I could only squawk any notes I tried to sing.”

“What?” he fumed. “You call yourself an opera singer?”

Wait a minute — I never said that.

Pointing to the front door he shouted, “Get out! You’re not a tenor until you can sing this aria!” (Which, by the way, was “Oh, tu che in seno agli angeli,” Alvaro’s famous aria from Verdi’s *La Forza del Destino*, an aria I did not look at until I was in my forties.)

He stomped out into the kitchen. I glanced around the corner of the kitchen door to see where he had gone, but the kitchen table held its ground and he had vanished. Not even Mrs. Fontana was there.