

Prologue

New York, 1991

For me, it has always been a challenge to give a gift of distinction, a gift whose relevance and usefulness far outlasts the occasion, but today was different. Today I had wrapped my gift with ribbons I hoped would be forever tied to my father's heart. He had reached a major milestone in his life that deserved to be commemorated—it was his ninetieth birthday. My thoughts danced with anticipation, knowing that I would be sharing this experience with him. I planned to take him on a special outing—one I imagined would be a passage through time for both of us.

We sat in silence as the ferry glided across the Hudson River. Memories flooded my mind of this man who lived every day of his life with such passion. I allowed myself the opportunity to appreciate his presence, to reflect on my father, to see life through his eyes. I was filled with admiration for all he had accomplished and for all the wisdom he possessed; not the wisdom attained by academics, but the wisdom that can only be acquired by living a lifetime.

We arrived early that October morning—I wanted to spend the whole day. Ellis Island had recently reopened its doors to visitors after many years of eerie silence. A tribute to generations of human spirit had been memorialized, and its interior exploded with thousands of personal stories of hardship and hope. Slowly, we wandered through each room, absorbing all that was presented. As I scanned the multitude of haunting faces that lined the walls, I realized my father's could have been any one of the forlorn expressions that mirrored the disquietude of an era. I tried to comprehend the magnitude of their struggle and courage, so unlike the life I had been living, but it must have been too real for my father, his silence was unsettling. Maybe the memories were too painful for him; maybe too many years had passed and he could not

remember; maybe he did not want to remember.

The morning drifted by, awakening a plethora of emotions within me, but my father looked weary, and I suggested we take a break. Outside, in the crisp autumn air, we rested on a bench overlooking the river—the welcomed warmth of the sun somewhat melting the chilling reality we had just beheld.

To ease the silence, I commented on the weather, saying, “It’s a beautiful day.”

My father simply replied, “Clare, every day you’re alive is a beautiful day.”

Throughout his life, the phrase “it’s a beautiful day” had become his mantra. I had always thought of it as cordial chitchat used to fill the uncomfortable gaps of silence in conversations, but only now did I comprehend the depth of his penetrating words. As if I had been sleepwalking through my years, my eyes opened wider, and I sat up straighter. His profound statement made me realize I do not respect the fragility of each day, the simplest pleasures in life, every precious moment. Life is a gift, and every day is an opportunity to revel in its glory.

As though seeing it for the first time, my father, Vincenzo Montanaro, stared transfixed at the Statue of Liberty that stood magnificently before us, her presence so significant, his expression just as compelling. Witnessing the depth of emotion so apparent on his face, my curiosity had piqued. I wished I could snuggle inside his thoughts and mimeograph his memories. There were many questions about his journey to America and our family, but I wondered if he was willing or able to fill in the pieces of the puzzle that made up their lives. He was the sole surviving member and the only one who could escort me across the bridge to their past. Tenderly, I gazed into his eyes and asked him what he remembered.

Suddenly, on this still day, a gust of wind swirled around us, rustling the leaves on the trees, and an unexpected chill permeated the air. Had I not known better, I would have thought

that the ghosts of the past had just descended upon him to refuel his mind. Gently, he took my hand in his—its size dwarfed mine. Shaking his head insistently, he chuckled and said he remembered it all as if it were yesterday. He exclaimed it was befitting to start his story at the very beginning—the one he had read in his mother’s journal revealing the circumstances that forced her to leave Italy and escape to America. When he said his mother’s name, Victoria, it was as if he were uttering a synonym for a saint. His eyes stared mysteriously into the distance; his mind focused on the past; his words echoed another time, another place, as he recalled the details with colorful lucidity, and I unconsciously slipped into an unfamiliar world and envisioned I was there.

Chapter 1

Caivano, Italy, 1906

Dusk refused to abate the heat of the day filtering in with Alfredo as he lumbered through the door. The usual carafe of wine on the table would allay his aches for the night, but as Angelina added ingredients to the simmering pot, she wished there was one that could numb the wound she was about to inflict.

She waited for her husband to drain his glass and pour himself another. He smiled weakly at her from his chair at the table. Tonight he seemed especially tired. By now he was usually sharing the events of his day.

Removing his spectacles, he sluggishly rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers. “Dinner smells good,” he said.

Angelina turned her head to look at him and forced a smile. “It’ll be a few more minutes,” she said, wondering whether she should tell him now or wait until after they ate. Pulling the handkerchief from the sleeve of her blouse, she blotted the beads of sweat from her forehead. Her nerves were getting the best of her, and she felt the spoon in her hand shaking. It had to be done now, she decided. “How was your day?” she asked. At least it was a start.

He frowned. “One of our mares fell ill, and I had to put her down. She was one of our best, too,” he said, scratching the bald spot on the top of his head.

Angelina instantly regretted she had asked, knowing she was about to make his bad day worse. Hopefully, the wine had soothed him somewhat. Walking over to the table, she wiped her palms on her apron. “Alfredo, I have something very difficult to tell you. I want you to know that I thought long and hard about this, and I believe it was the right thing to do.”

“Then why do you sound so unconvinced?” He lifted his eyebrows and raised his hand

along with the question.

She held on to the back of a chair for support and looked down at the table to avert his gaze. Her heart was pounding hard inside her chest, and she took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. “There’s no easy way to tell you this,” she finally said.

“What is it, Angelina?” he said, heaving a sigh of slight impatience.

“I gave Victoria our savings so she could go to America and be with Dominick. She’ll be safe with her brother. He’ll take care of them.” As she spoke she saw her husband’s face twist into a knot of disbelief and rage, and panic descended upon her like darkness on a moonless night. “She was miserable. She was so unhappy...and the children. Believe me, Alfredo, it’s the only way they could get away from him.”

Slamming his hand to his chest, he demanded, “Where are they?”

“They left before dawn.”

“Tell me this isn’t true!” His voice grew louder, and his skin flushed crimson. “What were you thinking? You should’ve come to me!” His bulging eyes bore into her. “Damn it, Angelina! Didn’t you think how this would affect all of us?”

Overwhelmed by her own guilt and loss, Angelina had no reply and looked away.

Jumping to his feet, Alfredo bounded over to the mattress and threw up its corner, exposing the empty spot where their coins had been hidden. Spinning around, he shoved her with both hands, and she caught the bottom of her skirt with the heel of her boot as she stumbled backward. Regaining her footing, she stood rigid and took a slow, ragged breath. She realized her betrayal had warranted his harsh reaction, but the words that followed struck her harder.

“How could you have disrespected me this way? What’s wrong with you? I’ve lost my family! I’ve lost everything!” Glaring down at the floor, he brusquely paced back and forth. “My

God, there's nothing left," he added with an abandon Angelina had never heard before.

"Please, don't say that," she pleaded, her body quivering along with her voice. "Someday they'll come back, or maybe we'll go there."

"What are the chances of that? Don't you understand, woman, we'll never see them again! How can I ever forgive you for this?"

Angelina clasped her hands over her ears, attempting to shut out his irrefutable words, his consummate anger.

Alfredo collapsed onto the edge of their bed. He sat hunched over and covered his face with his hands, catching the tears that poured from his heart, and his agony mercilessly pierced Angelina to the core.

Chapter 2

Six years earlier, 1900

The sweet nectar of ripened grapes drifted through the air as Victoria walked through the vineyards toward the river with a basket of clothes balanced upon her head. A disarming inquisitiveness stirred inside her when she caught a glimpse of Salvatore's thick, dark hair and smooth, olive skin glistening in the afternoon sun. The muscles on his arms and back flexed as he heaved the heavy logs onto a cart.

Victoria knew little about the boy she was admiring and found herself wondering why words had never passed between them. Salvatore lived on the outskirts of the village, and she was aware his family worked the lumber mill. It was rumored that his mother had taken her own life many years ago, but Victoria did not pay it much heed until now. Watching him, she suddenly felt a twinge of compassion and decided to question her father that evening.

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Relaxing at the end of the day, Papa and her brother, Dominick, sat at the table sipping wine, while Mama juggled the well-worn pots and utensils that hung like a frame around the hearth's perimeter. Victoria and her sister-in-law, Genevieve, watched Angelina tend to the blackened cauldron suspended above the flames. The fragrant aroma of its contents mingled with the air, tantalizing Victoria with an assortment of the earth's finest treasures. She could feel the golden warmth sautéing in her stomach—a fusion of flavors garnished with her mother's tenderness.

Placing bowls on the table, Victoria nonchalantly asked, "Papa, what happened to Salvatore Ricci's mother?"

Alfredo looked up at her. The autumn air was warm and still, and he swiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “Life is more difficult for some than for others, my child,” he finally said.

His abbreviated explanation did not appease Victoria. “What do you mean? Tell me, I want to know.”

“It’s complicated. Let’s just say a good woman left us before the Lord was ready for her.”

“Wasn’t she married to your cousin Francis?” she asked.

“Francis is my second cousin, but we no longer speak of him in this house.”

Angelina turned from the hearth to face her husband. “Alfredo, maybe it’s time you told them what happened with Francis.”

Victoria glanced at her brother curiously, and he shrugged his shoulders, looking just as confused.

Alfredo bent over and struck a match on the wood floor and lit his pipe. “Francis and I haven’t spoken for years. He thought his personal life was none of my concern, and he reacted with fists rather than words.” He took a drag on his pipe and watched the smoke as he exhaled. “You have to understand, Francis is as hard as the wood he mills. With a heavy hand, he sends his children home each evening covered in sawdust and craving a sliver of praise or affection.” He paused. “The sad truth is that Josephina took her own life to escape the severity of the husband who broke her spirit, leaving behind her six children.” His voice was soft, and he shook his head as he spoke. “It was a sad day indeed, not only for her family, but for much of the village. There are some that still look down upon her for what she did. I say only God can judge us.”

Genevieve walked over to Dominick. He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close as Victoria muttered grimly, “How awful.”

Eyeing Victoria, Alfredo asked, “Why this sudden interest?”

“I saw Salvatore working at the mill today, and I was just wondering...”

In a firm tone, Alfredo insisted, “Victoria, I want you to stay away from him.”

She was taken aback by his curt reply. “Why?”

With his elbow resting on the arm of his chair, he pointed his finger in the air as he spoke. “Although I have pity for him, his childhood has been filled with the kind of grief that stirs the soul and torments the mind.”

Standing at the opposite end of the table, Victoria opined, “But, Papa, maybe he could use a friend.”

“Then let him look elsewhere for his friends.”

She straightened her back. “That’s unkind. I’m fourteen and—”

“And nothing! Salvatore is a man at eighteen, and you’re merely a child.”

Unnerved to think her father still considered her a child, Victoria’s eyes grew wide as she swallowed the judgment.

Turning to his son, Alfredo asked, “Did you finish loading the barrels so everything’s ready for the morning?”

“It’s all done,” Dominick said.

Victoria slumped into her chair with her eyes still wide on her father and her frustration festering inside, and dinner began in an awkward silence.

Now it made sense to Victoria why Salvatore’s family kept to themselves. She thought that it was unfair the children had been left without a mother and were living with a father who

was so cruel. She was surprised her father was so insensitive. His disagreement with Francis should have no reflection on his children. Her father claimed that God was the only judge, but Alfredo had already judged Salvatore without even giving him a chance.

Victoria had lost her appetite but forced herself to eat. Her stomach felt queasy, and she declined the ladleful of stewed pears her mother offered for dessert. She wondered if Salvatore was having dessert, she wondered who cooked him his meals.

When everyone had finished, she and Genevieve cleared the plates while Angelina filled the basin with the kettle of warm water that was hanging above the hearth. It was Victoria's turn to wash, and Genevieve picked up the towel to dry.

"That's so sad what Papa just told us," Victoria said to Genevieve, keeping her voice low.

"Francis must be a horrible man. I feel sorry for his children," Genevieve said.

Victoria turned around to look at her mother. "Did you know Josephine?" she asked.

"Not that well. She was a quiet woman...kept to herself. It was heartbreaking what happened." Angelina sighed. "I'll never forget the look on her children's faces when she was laid to rest. It was all so sad." She took the dried pot from Genevieve, hung it on a hook by the fire, and turned back around. "Papa didn't want to go to her funeral because of Francis, but I told him that he should out of respect for Josephine." They worked together in silence until Angelina put the last of the cleaned dishes on the shelf and broke the lull. "Let's sit down now," she said.

Alfredo removed the Bible from the sideboard near the cottage's entrance. It was their most treasured possession. It guided their family with lessons of faith, and he taught Victoria and Dominick how to read and write its sacred words. Gently carrying it in the palms of his hands, he placed it on the table and sat down. He carefully opened the book—its edges frayed and pages brittle—and started his story in an animated flare. "The sun beat down on the thousands upon

thousands of people in the desert who were starving, and they begged Jesus for help. He told his disciples to gather food, and he took the five loaves of bread and two fish and asked God for a miracle. He ordered his disciples to feed the masses, and everyone sat and ate their meal in awe until their stomachs were filled and..." As Alfredo spoke, he twisted the stiff hairs of his arched mustache with his fingers as if conjuring the scene. In the glow of the candlelight, his weathered skin was thick and creased, and his round, blue eyes were encircled with wisdom.

Normally, Victoria absorbed his every word, the conviction of his tone, and the resoluteness of his expression. Tonight, however, she was having trouble concentrating on her father's voice. For the first time, she was listening to the beat of her own heart.

When Alfredo ended the parable, he made the sign of the cross before closing the book. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day, and we should all get our rest."

Victoria was the one to always pout a protest and plead for more, but this evening she was relieved to be alone with her thoughts.

"Genevieve and I will be back at sun up," Dominick said to his father as he rose from the table. "Good night, Mama. Dinner was delicious." Angelina held out her cheek, and Dominick affectionately planted a kiss next to the smile on her face. "Good night, sis," he called out.

"See you in the morning," Genevieve said. Following her husband out the door, she gave Victoria a sympathetic smile and her eyes flashed concern.

Victoria felt a sudden rush of gratitude. Genevieve had sensed her interest in Salvatore was more than a passing breeze; of that she was certain. Her sister-in-law had grown up just over the hill, and she was Victoria's best friend prior to becoming Dominick's wife. Over the years, she and Genevieve had developed a silent language only they had the power to discern.

Yawning, Victoria blew a kiss in her parents' direction and mumbled a weak, "Good night." She climbed the ladder to the loft and quickly changed into her nightdress. Lying down on the feathered mattress, she haphazardly covered herself with a quilt—so worn, the designs of her great-grandmother had long since faded—and turned on her side. Alfredo blew out the last of the candles dotting the cottage's interior, causing darkness to descend. Below, her parents' bed rested on a timbered frame as intricately molded as the people it lulled, while Victoria lay wide-eyed above them, eager for the morning to come, eager to see Salvatore again.