

Rosemary Fifield



**Hope's
Angel**

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by Rosemary Fifield

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PROLOGUE

November, 1952

Papa tucked a thin blanket around the four-year-old's body and lifted her from her bed.

Icy night air brushed her cheeks as he carried her outdoors and down the stairs, and she buried her face against the scratchy surface of his wool coat, too frightened to ask what was happening. He never spoke, even when he bent low into the blackness and set her on the cold back seat of a car. Her sister wrapped in a blanket of her own, leaned into the far corner. Frosty wisps of breath, gentle and rhythmic, paced the older girl's sleep. The child snuggled into her sister's warmth and stared, wide-eyed, at the darkness around her.

Papa slid onto the front seat behind the steering wheel and pulled the car door shut. Mamma was already on the bench seat, a triangle of red and yellow cloth tied over her dark hair and under her chin. Her jaw set as she stared straight ahead. No words passed between them.

A full moon traveled with them as their car wound its way through the Vermont countryside. The moon passed in and out of wispy clouds, its eerie silver light periodically illuminating the still woods and dormant fields that flanked the quiet back roads. The car hummed along for over an hour, lulling everyone within to a transitory state of calm.

The child drifted in and out of sleep, then startled awake; the car was no longer moving. Papa leaned forward, fidgeting with the key. Beside him on the bench seat, Mamma made the sign of the cross, then brought her curled index finger and thumb to her lips and kissed them as though she were holding the crucifix itself. The four-year-old fought to keep her eyes open, but the hour was late and she was exhausted.

The night chill worked its way into the car, penetrating the thin blanket around the child. She opened her eyes. Nothing in the darkness was familiar, except for the sound of her sister's steady breathing. But they weren't in the warm bed they normally shared. She sat upright and looked around, her small heart fluttering with fear. Faint light came through the squares of glass surrounding her.

"Papa?" She kept her voice low on the chance that someone else, someone unwanted, might hear her. Silence.

"Mamma?"

Nothing.

Her heart pounded wildly against her ribs, and hot tears welled in her eyes. She was about to press closer to her sister's reassuring presence when a glow from the window beside her sister's head drew her attention.

A silvery angel with a serene, benevolent face stood outside the car, its eyes trained on the child. Flowing robes fell in soft, graceful folds about its bare feet, and a pair of glorious wings arched above its wide shoulders. It extended its arms to her in welcome, and the rapt child gaped. She had never seen anyone so beautiful, so perfect, and all the stories her nonna had told her about the Lord's special creatures came back to fill her with wonder and awe. She opened her mouth to talk to the angel; she wanted to hear its voice, for she knew it would be wonderful, but—no!—the magnificent angel was silently slipping away, its haunting eyes fixed on hers as it receded into the darkness.

Something had frightened it away. The car door was opening.

Terrified, the child shrank back against her sister, making herself as small as possible behind the older girl.

A rush of cold air filled the car. Mamma appeared, bulky in her dark winter coat and wooly scarf. She settled onto the front seat without a word, and the door beside her closed. A moment later, the driver's side door opened, and Papa slid behind the steering wheel. The car's motor made a grating sound, then rumbled to a rhythmic sputtering. Gravel crunched beneath them as the car rolled forward. The child relaxed against her sister with a sigh of relief and closed her eyes; all was well once more.

A baby whimpered.

The four-year-old's eyes popped open.

She scooted forward and peered over the seatback. Mamma was undoing the buttons of her winter coat with one hand. She held a bundle of blankets in the opposite arm, and when she brought it to the opening in her clothing, the sound of a baby suckling was unmistakable. The child's heart pounded with excitement. "Mamma?"

"Go back to sleep, little one."

She would never be able to sleep now. "Is that our baby?"

"Yes."

The child clutched her blanket to her chest and bounced lightly in place, unable to contain her exuberance. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A girl."

"What's her name?"

"Hope. Hope Marie."

The child leaned forward in the darkness as the car rumbled down the gravel road. "The angel smiled at me," she said, certain that her mother would be pleased.

Mamma's head turned toward the rear seat. "What angel?"

The child blinked in confusion. What was Mamma thinking? "The one who brought the baby."

"You dream." Mamma sounded weary. "Go back to sleep."

The child shook her head, sure of what she knew. "I saw it. It smiled at me."

"Silence!" Papa's voice traveled from the front seat, forceful and uncharacteristically gruff, and the child jumped. She immediately slid back against the coldness of the seat and pulled the blanket to her chin, trembling and confused.

She didn't understand. They had waited so long for God to bring this baby. Nonna had come from far away to cook and clean, to take care of the family while Mamma stayed in bed day after day, waiting and praying. And now the baby was here. Brought by an angel.

"Go back to sleep, little one." Mamma's voice came from the darkness, as gentle as a lullaby. "Go back to your dream."

CHAPTER ONE

Friday, August 23, 1968

“You don’t know how blessed you are, Pietro. You have only daughters. Nobody’s going to send them to war.”

Connie Balestra looked up from bagging the customer’s purchases and glanced at her father.

Papa continued arranging the kohlrabi on his outdoor stand, his back to the customer. “They should not send anyone. If President Kennedy, he’s not to die, we would not be there.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I just know they’ve called up my son.” The man gave Connie a nod of thanks as he reached out to take the bag of vegetables and fruit from her outstretched hands.

His facial features resembled those of her father—chestnut brown eyes and a luxuriant salt-and-pepper mustache beneath a prominent nose. But while Italian by heritage, the man spoke English without the accent that characterized most of the people who patronized her family’s neighborhood grocery store.

Papa scowled as he turned to look at his customer. “*Mi dispiace*, Signor Altuna. I will say the prayer for him. *Come si chiama?*”

“Thomas.”

“We will light the candle for Thomas.”

“*Grazie.*” The man nodded to Connie once more, then to Papa, and walked out from under the striped awning.

Papa moved on to straighten the bulbs of fennel displayed beside the kohlrabi. “Where is your sister?” he asked.

“Which one?”

Papa lifted one bushy black eyebrow in an exaggerated gesture of incredulity. They both knew where Gianna would be. Gianna was so predictable, she made you want to cry; Angie was the impetuous one.

“She’ll be here soon,” Connie reassured him, although she wasn’t sure at all. “Don’t worry.”

“I worry.”

Connie smiled to herself as she refilled the supply of brown paper bags beside the carton of tomatoes. Papa might not have any sons to lose to the war in Vietnam, but his three girls provided him with plenty to fret about.

She climbed cement steps to the open doorway between the shop’s large front windows. A heady Mediterranean perfume greeted her—a pungent mix of *baccalá*, strong cheeses, and fresh herbs. It was the smell of home, a smell she knew she would miss some day when she finished college and moved away to find a job.

She strolled through the old-fashioned store with its dark wood trim and low tinned ceiling, past the imported pasta and the old deli cooler displaying cured meats, to the door at the rear marked “Employees Only.” The storeroom held extra cases of dry goods and a tiny corner office where Gianna kept the books and placed her orders.

An unmarked door opened into the large laundry area at the back of the building. Mamma sat in the brightly lit room, running freshly washed sheets and pillowcases through the rollers of a mangle, folding and ironing other people’s whites into neat, warm piles fragrant with the smell of detergent and bluing agent.

“Papa’s looking for Angie,” Connie said.

Mamma kept her attention on her work as she folded a flat bed sheet in half and fed it into the roller.
“She’s at the library.”

“She’s supposed to be helping Papa. I promised Nonna I would come to the church to cook for the *fiesta* tomorrow.”

“Gianna can do it. She’s upstairs.”

Connie knew Gianna wouldn’t take well to covering for Angie, but she also knew better than to say what she was thinking. Instead, she turned on her heel and headed out the side door into the glare of the sunny August afternoon. The staircase that led to their second floor apartment clung to the side of the building, and she took the stairs two at a time.

Gianna was in the upstairs kitchen, standing at the gas stove, stirring a steaming pot of macaroni and bean soup with a wooden spoon.

Connie sighed in dismay at the sight of her. Gianna had plaited her dark hair into two long braids, then pinned them in concentric circles around the crown of her head—a hairstyle popular with the grandmother and her ancient sisters, Lucretia and Mariana.

“Ma wants you to take Angie’s place downstairs ‘til she gets home.”

Gianna frowned at Connie from behind her tortoise-shell glasses. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I have to help Nonna at the church.” Connie surveyed her older sister’s wardrobe with disdain—the usual tired apron over the shapeless sundress. “Are you *trying* to look like you just came over on the boat?”

Gianna looked down at her clothes, then back up at Connie, her forehead creased in irritation. “What should I wear bell bottoms like your hippie friends?”

“At least get rid of the Buddy Hollys.” Connie shook her head. “Even a pair of granny glasses would look better. Plus they’d match the hairdo and the housedress. You look like Nonna, for God’s sake.”

“It’s a sundress, smart mouth, and don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.” Gianna gestured toward Connie with the wooden spoon like one of the elementary school nuns with the dreaded yardstick. “You need to go to Confession. You’re turning into a real heathen.”

“Ha! Well, at least I have something to confess. It must be awfully boring being you.”

“*Madonna! Voi mi fate impazzire!*” Mamma’s angry voice came from behind Connie as the screen door slapped shut.

“English, Mamma.” Connie moved out of her mother’s way as the latter brushed past to wash her hands at the kitchen sink.

“You girls make me to be crazy, so stop!” Mamma wiped her wet hands on the ever-present apron she wore over her housedress and turned to Gianna with blazing dark eyes. “You! Help your papa. His feet hurt. I see it.” Her gaze shifted to Connie. “You! Go cook at the church.”

Gianna slid past them both, her eyes narrowed in anger as they met Connie’s. When Gianna was safely on her way down the back stairs, Connie turned to her small, dark-haired mother. “She’s going to live with you for the rest of your life, you know.”

Mamma rolled her eyes. “I begin to understand why we—*come si dice?*— give to the marriage birth.”

“Betroth. She’s not bad-looking, you know, if she would just drop the ugly glasses and do something decent with her hair.” Connie rethought that for a moment and sighed. “Of course, she’d still have to leave the house once in a while for some guy to actually notice.”

Mamma crossed the kitchen to the stove and picked up the wooden spoon. “Maybe she meets a nice boy in the church.”

Connie doubted that. “She hangs in the choir loft with the nuns.”

Mamma’s brow furrowed. “She hangs?”

“It’s an expression. Never mind.” Connie stood for a moment, watching her mother stir the soup. Was it the right time to bring up Greg? Considering that she and Mamma were rarely alone, this was probably as good an opportunity as any. “Mamma, I have something to ask you. I need your help.”

Mamma’s wary gaze shifted to Connie’s face, her unsmiling countenance a mixture of misgiving and concern.

“It’s nothing bad, Mamma. It’s good. I mean, it could be as long as Papa lets it happen.”

“Aha. A boy.”

Connie grimaced. “Not exactly. Well, sort of. You remember I told you I talked to this guy, Greg Fairchild, the one I see at school all the time? The one who lives in town here? He commutes every day, like I do. And he asked if I wanted to ride in together sometimes and, you know, share the cost. It’s not like a date. He’s got a girlfriend. It’s just a thing—like a convenience. It could save us both money. And I wouldn’t need to take the car every day.”

Mamma looked skeptical. “You ride in his car with this boy every day?”

“Not every day. Just when our schedules work. And he’s not a boy. He’s in college.”

“You are alone in a car with this... man.” The tenor of Mamma’s voice left no doubt about her disapproval.

“No, I would just be in the car. It’s not about being alone with him.”

“How is this not the same?”

Connie did her best not to roll her eyes. “Mamma, right now I drive an hour to school and an hour back every day. I drive in the snow. I drive in the dark. *That’s* when you should worry about me being alone. If I rode with somebody, I wouldn’t be alone. I’d be safer.”

“No girls go to the UVM?”

“Not from here. They live on campus. In the dorms.”

Mamma frowned. “You don’t know this boy. He could be... *un violentatore*.”

Connie’s skin flushed with heat at the thought of handsome Greg Fairchild attacking her in the front seat of his car. “I know him well enough. He’s nice. His father’s a lawyer. They’re a good family.”

“Aha.” Mamma nodded and turned to stir her soup. “*L’alta società*.”

Connie let her eyes roll. “I don’t know about high society. I just know he’s a good person. Besides, he’s got a girlfriend. He’s not interested in me.”

“To be the girlfriend is more safe. You are nothing to him.”

“Aiee!” Connie waved her arms in exasperation as she stared at her mother. “I could have just met him at the Park and Ride, and you never would have known! But I wanted to do it right!”

Mamma set the wooden spoon down on the stovetop and turned to look at Connie. Her expression was stern. “You invite him to meet your papa. That is all I say.”

Connie groaned. “Mamma, it’s not a marriage proposal. All I want to do is bum a ride!”

“*Sì*. This means it is no big work.”

Connie let out a defeated sigh. “Big *deal*. It’s no big deal.”

A small smile played about Mamma’s lips as she turned away. “This is what I say, Concetta. It’s no big deal.”

The women of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic church were preparing for the annual *festa* in honor of their parish’s patron saint, and Connie spent the remainder of the afternoon working beside them in the windowless basement kitchen. They stood side by side at the long counter against the wall or behind the wooden table in the middle of the room, cutting up peppers and onions to be fried as accompaniments to pans full of grilled Italian sausage, forming the stuffed and breaded rice balls known as *arancini*, and making the sweet ricotta filling and the deep-fried shells for *cannoli*.

As they worked, they talked about the same things Americans everywhere were talking about—the war in a country none of them had heard of just five years before; the war that came into their living rooms every day via the evening news, making it impossible to ignore; the war that threatened to take their sons and grandsons, husbands and boyfriends, as it continued to escalate in spite of President Johnson’s promises to end it. They also talked about the upcoming national convention, where Hubert Humphrey was sure to become the Democratic candidate for President, a position that should have been held by Bobby Kennedy, God rest his soul.

When they finished their work in the kitchen, Connie and her grandmother left to walk home together. As they passed the vacant lot between the church and the rectory, they saw several men putting the final touches on wooden booths erected for the sale of the food—pounding in the last of the nails and stringing colored light bulbs across the booth tops. Others were setting up a station for dartboards and building temporary bocce courts among the few trees. A small, covered stage festooned with banners and lights occupied the far end of the grounds. As part of the festivities on the following day, men of the church’s Holy Name Society would carry the life-sized statue of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in a procession from the church to a special dais on the outdoor stage.

Connie and her grandmother walked the four city blocks to the turn-of-the-century duplex Nonna shared with her two elderly sisters. The three widows occupied both levels, Nonna living upstairs with her sister Lucretia, while Mariana lived downstairs with her unmarried forty-something son, Tony.

When they reached the house, Nonna invited Connie inside, but Connie declined with an apologetic smile. Her mother would have supper on the table as soon as the store closed at six, and anyone who planned to eat was expected to be on time.

“First you come to the garden.” While she understood English, Nonna refused to speak it, conversing only in Italian. No one challenged her; as the matriarch of the family she commanded their respect.

Connie dutifully followed her around the side of the house to the small urban backyard. Despite its tight boundaries, the yard managed to accommodate an extensive vegetable garden, a full-sized pear tree, a chicken coop full of laying hens, and a grape arbor heavily laden with dangling, ripening fruit. In their attempt to recreate a small section of Puglia in their Vermont backyard, the three elderly sisters even managed to keep a fig tree, making poor Tony bury it in a trench every winter and resurrect it every spring in order for it to survive the cold.

“Next year, the olive tree,” Nonna would say with a sparkle in her eye, knowing full well that wouldn’t be happening but always open to the possibility.

She led Connie into the depths of the neatly maintained garden, past carefully staked tomato plants and rows of ferny kohlrabi, and bent to pull two oversized zucchini from beneath massive overspreading leaves.

“I know, I know,” Nonna said, waving her hand when Connie began to protest. “My son runs a store. But he doesn’t have squash like this. You take them to your mother. She’ll be happy to have them.”

Connie took the zucchini and held one in each arm like two big green babies nestled into the bends of her elbows. “Thanks, Nonna. Angie loves these stuffed and baked.”

“Ah, this reminds me. Can one of you girls come to stay with Lucretia after church on Sunday? Sis Barbara is in the hospital, and I should visit, but Mariana and Tony go to Boston on Sunday to see Teresa’s new baby.”

“I’m sure one of us can.” Connie kissed her grandmother’s soft, wrinkly cheek, then headed down the narrow sidewalk along the side of the house, calling back over her shoulder, “See you tomorrow, Nonna. I’ll be there by ten. Thanks for the zukes.”

As soon as she hit the tree-lined public sidewalk, Connie sped up the pace. She had half a block to go on Church Street before turning toward home, and this was the neighborhood where several of Paul Cefalu’s relatives lived. She had harbored a crush on him since tenth grade, and even though they had gone their separate ways since graduation two years before, she still experienced a rush of irrational excitement at the possibility of seeing him on the street. At that moment, however, she didn’t want him to see her. Her pants and shirt were smudged with flour and dried ricotta, the humidity in the kitchen had turned her shoulder-length hair into an uncontrolled explosion of curls, and she was cradling two ridiculously large zucchini in her arms.

As if on cue, three young men, laughing and talking, burst out of the side yard of the house to her right, approaching the sidewalk at a brisk pace. One of them let out a long, low whistle and said, “Wow. Nice squash.”

Connie shot them a withering look and found herself gazing into the deep blue eyes of Paul Cefalu. They were bright with amusement, and the small smile on his full, closed lips made her heart skip a beat. He was incredibly good-looking with his black curls and olive complexion, and when he gave her a silent, smirking nod, the ragged beating of her heart left her light-headed.

He said nothing as his buddies laughed, and Connie’s insides tightened. Had her face revealed what she was feeling? Most likely it had, but then, Paul was used to girls swooning over him.

She turned away from the three of them and hurried toward home once more.

“Hey, Con, I saw your baby sister this afternoon,” Frankie Fiorello called after her. “She’s not such a baby no more.”

Connie’s heart plummeted. Angie was so naïve and trusting, she would be no match for any of these guys if they were to come on to her. Connie stopped in her tracks and turned back, glaring at him as he stood on the sidewalk watching her with an idiotic grin. “She’s fifteen, Frankie. Buzz off.”

“I’m just saying, she sure is a looker.” He put up both hands as if Connie were about to personally propel herself at him as he added, “Not that you’re not. You know what I mean? But something different about her. She’s not your run-of-the-mill *ragazza*, you know?”

“I think you should shut up now, Frankie,” his buddy Nino Scarpa said with a grin. “You’re not

exactly making points here, man. You sayin' our Connie's run of the mill?"

"Shut up yourself, Nino." Frankie made a rude hand gesture. "That's not what I said."

Connie shook her head and turned away from them once more. "I really don't give a rat's ass what either of you said. Just leave my sister alone."

She had reached the corner and started down the final, sun-speckled stretch of tree-lined sidewalk toward home when Nino came up on her left and kept pace with her.

"Here, let me carry those things." He gestured toward the zucchini in her arms. "One o' them would feed all fifteen of Frankie's family." He gave Connie a conspiratorial grin, his brown eyes shining as he watched her. "He's not gonna bother Angie, you know. He's all talk."

Connie kept her profile to him and her arms tight around the zucchini. She had gone out with Nino a few times the summer before she started college, but things hadn't clicked. He was nice enough and he was a great kisser, but he lacked ambition, planning to do nothing more than what his old man had done—work in the granite quarries in Barre. His major goal in life was to build a cooler muscle car than Frankie's older brother, Carl.

"Con, gimme a frickin' zucchini."

Connie hesitated, reluctant to let him help her. He could take it wrong and assume that she wanted to resume their relationship. "I'm fine."

"Oh, for God's sake, Con." He stopped and frowned at her as though she were being a bratty child.

She avoided meeting his gaze as she stopped and said, "If you take one, you gotta take both. They balance each other out."

He took the two zucchini from her, tucked one under each arm like a football, and they continued toward her house. "So, are you gonna be selling stuff at the *fiesta* tomorrow?" he asked.

Connie shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "Yeah, probably."

"It's supposed to be a nice day."

"Good. I hope so."

An awkward silence hung between them.

"So," Connie finally said, "are you and Tina still going out?"

Nino shrugged and looked straight ahead. "Sometimes. You got anybody right now?"

"Not really. I don't want to, with school and all. I've still got two years. Besides," she added in an attempt to keep things light, "tradition says we gotta marry off the oldest first. Know anybody?"

"For Topo Gigio?" He gave her a grin. "Nobody that desperate."

"Hey." Connie scowled at him. "I can say stuff like that about my sister, not you. Have some respect."

Nino's grin widened. "You name your sister after the stupid Italian mouse on Ed Sullivan, and you tell me to have some respect? Ha!"

They approached the front of the store. Two women were poking among the vegetables in the outside display, and the door to the store was still open. Connie sighed with relief and took the zucchini from Nino.

"Do you think you might want to go see a movie some time?" His cocoa-brown eyes were filled with hopefulness. "I heard *Planet of the Apes* is coming to Burlington."

Connie directed her gaze toward the browsing customers a few feet away. She hated to hurt his feelings, but going out with him didn't interest her. "I don't know. Like I said, I've got other stuff to think about right now." She glanced up at him and gave him a small smile. "Say hi to Tina for me, okay? And thanks for carrying the zukes."

"Yeah. Sure." He backed away with an awkward, embarrassed look on his face, and for a moment Connie regretted brushing him off. Still, she had no desire to be with him, and feeling sorry for him was hardly a reason to go out on a date.

"Would you come if I said we could double-date with Paul?" His upper lip curled ever so slightly as he spoke.

He knew? "Why would I care?"

Nino let out a derisive snort. "Gimme a break, Con."

Connie felt her color rise. "No," she answered with a forcefulness she hoped sounded genuine. "No, wouldn't. Paul's good to look at, that's all. It doesn't mean anything."

"Yeah, right." Nino's eyes narrowed as the contempt on his face increased.

She wasn't about to argue with him. "I need to help these customers, Nino. Thanks again for walking with me. Really. That was nice. Now, I gotta go."

Nino turned on his heel without answering and headed back the way they had come.

One of the women had gone inside the store; Connie could hear Papa talking with her. The other woman was choosing from among the few eggplants remaining on the stand, and Connie paused to ask if she needed assistance. The woman looked at the giant zucchini cradled in Connie's arms like a set of green twins and laughed, then said she was all set. Connie walked around the side of the building and carried her vegetables up the stairs.

The overly warm kitchen was redolent with the pungent smell of frying fish, and her mother was the only person in the room.

Connie set the zucchini on the counter beside the sink. "I thought we were having *pasta e fagioli*."

Mamma turned from her position in front of the stove, her eyes settling on the large squash. "Signor LaCroix was here. He brought fish. Such big zucchini."

Connie smiled at the prospect of seeing her father's friend, a quiet little man whose company the entire family enjoyed. "Mr. LaCroix? We haven't seen him in a long time. Is he still here?"

"No. Today he visits with your papa, then he goes. His wife, she is sick."

Connie stood at the sink and washed her hands. "That's too bad. I'm sorry I missed him." She wiped her hands on a cloth towel and peered over her mother's shoulder at two frying pans full of breaded fillets. "Wow. Those are big. What are they?"

Mamma shrugged. "*Boh!* I don't ask."

"He sure is good at catching stuff." Mr. LaCroix appeared at their house several times a year, leaving packages of venison or whole pheasants or fish that he caught. Sometimes he brought meat from the rabbits that he raised. Papa was especially fond of rabbit meat.

Voices from the outside stairs signaled the approach of Papa and Angie. Connie helped carry food into the small dining room where Gianna had set the table and was pouring wine into each glass. Upon reaching the age of fifteen, each child in the family was allowed one glass of Papa's homemade red wine with dinner if she wanted it. None of them refused.

The family sat down together, said grace, and proceeded to pass the food. Papadid not approve of talking at the table, and so they kept their attentions on the meal, beginning with small bowls of Gianna's pasta and bean soup followed by plates of fish, braised fennel, and mixed greens. Angie passed Connie the basket of bread, and when their eyes met, Connie remembered what Frankie Fiorello had said about her little sister. *Something's different about her. She's not your run-of-the-mill Italian girl.*

Connie glanced at Angie as they ate, pondering what Frankie meant. Angie had always been smaller in frame than either Gianna or Connie—more like their mother. Her eyes and hair were as dark as her sisters', but where Connie's hair was curly and often needed taming, Angie's was straight. Gianna's hair, nobody could remember. She kept it in the damn braids all the time; it could have been anything.

Frankie was right, of course—Angie was a “looker.” She always had been the cutest of the three girls with finer features and more well-defined cheekbones. Still, Connie couldn't see what made Angie anything other than a cute *paesana*. Perhaps it was more about her demeanor, her ability to be comfortable in her own skin, something Connie and Gianna and many of their friends had yet to achieve. Angie was intellectual without being awkward, confident without being cocky. She never put on the tough front that Connie often did, trying to cover her insecurities. Angie was more grown-up than fifteen than either of her twenty-something sisters.

“So,” Papa said, officially breaking the silence as he put down his knife and fork and reached for his glass of wine, “tomorrow is *fiesta*. But the store is open. Who will be here with me?”

“Father Ianelli's expecting two of us to sell *cannoli* all day.” Connie glanced hopefully at her oldest sister. “Gigi? You want to do it with me?”

Gianna looked up from her plate. “Me?”

“Yeah. It'll be fun.”

Across the table, Angie stuck out her lower lip in an attempt to look pitiful. “What about me?”

Connie laughed. “You can come later. Maybe switch after lunch?”

“You all go,” Mamma answered. “I will work the store.” She turned to smile at Papa. “It will be like old times,” she said in Italian. “Maybe we even take the siesta in the afternoon.”

Angie cleared her throat and looked away. “Too much information for me,” she said with a wave of her eyebrows.

“Selling *cannoli* sounds better and better,” Gianna agreed, with an exaggerated widening of her eyes. “I'll be there.”

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday

The three sisters arrived at the *festa* grounds shortly before ten, and the priest immediately put them all to work—Gianna and Connie in the noisy, bustling kitchen and Angie outdoors setting up a stand of children’s games. The fair would officially open at eleven.

Gianna and Connie carried the *cannoli* shells and supplies out to their booth on the grassy *festa* grounds, winding their way among the wooden structures now bearing an array of painted signs, sparkling trinkets, and assorted types of food. Angie’s colorful stand meant to appeal to small children was surrounded by teen-aged boys, pushing and shoving each other, vying for Angie’s attention.

“I didn’t know teenagers were that crazy about the beanbag toss,” Connie said as she spread a tablecloth over their booth’s rough-hewn counter.

Gianna snorted.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Connie said. “Aunt Lucretia needs a babysitter tomorrow. It’s your turn.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Gianna pulled out the money box and set it on the counter, then opened it and counted the money inside. “I’ve got a date.”

Connie’s initial irritation transformed into delight. “You’ve got a what? With a guy? Who?”

A small smile teased at her sister’s lips, making her look uncharacteristically coquettish. “None of your business.”

“Why not? You know all of my business.”

Gianna closed the money box and slipped it beneath the countertop. “Yeah, I saw you with Nick Scarpa yesterday. Are you two a thing again?”

“We were never a thing. And don’t change the subject. Who?”

Gianna picked up the stack of napkins and squared them into a neat pile. “You don’t know him.”

Connie was thrilled. “He’s not from the neighborhood? Good for you! So, where’s he from?”

“St. Johnsbury.”

This was getting better all the time. “Really? How’d you meet him?”

Gianna kept her attention fixed on the napkins as though she expected them to reassemble themselves at any moment. “He went to seminary when Father Ianelli was teaching.”

Seminary? Connie leaned closer to make sure she had heard correctly. “He’s a priest?”

Gianna’s expression soured. “Of course not. He dropped out. He never took any vows.”

“How old is he? Father hasn’t taught there in ten years.”

“He’s thirty-two.”

Connie gaped. “Thirty-two?”

Gianna’s voice was plaintive. “I’m twenty-three, remember?”

“So? You say that like twenty-three is ancient.”

“Oh, really?” Gianna’s hurt expression reinforced her tone. “And you don’t think that’s how you and Mamma make me feel? Like it’s such a big deal that I’m not married by now?”

Connie winced. Had she really done that? “It’s only a big deal because you don’t try.”

Gianna raised her chin. “And who says I have to try? Maybe I don’t want to get married. Did you even think of that?”

Connie found that doubtful. “Is that true? You don’t want to? Because we used to talk about our plans for when we got married all the time, remember? Before you went off to that stupid all-girls college *The all-girls college*. Why hadn’t she thought of it before? “Gigi, you’re not—”

Gianna scowled. “What? One of *them*? No. I can’t believe you would ask me that.”

Connie took the napkins from her and set them on the corner of the stand. “Why? If you are, you are. You wouldn’t be the first.”

“Well, I’m not. It’s just ... I like my life the way it is.”

Was she kidding? “You like living with your *parents*, working in your father’s *store*?”

Gianna’s defiance returned. “I like being my own person. Reading a book when I feel like it. Going to a movie. Sleeping in. I don’t have to go do stuff I don’t want to do because it’s what some guy likes.”

“So now I’m confused,” Connie said. “Why are you going out with this guy tomorrow?”

Gianna took the serving utensils from their cardboard box and set them on the tablecloth. “We’re not exactly going out. He’s visiting Father. I’m just joining them for coffee in the afternoon. Father invited me.”

“Ah. You and how many others?”

“Just me.” Gianna lined up the utensils in a neat row. “I think he thinks maybe we have something in common.”

Connie sighed. The last thing she wanted to do was discourage Gianna from meeting a new guy.

“Well, then I guess you won’t be staying with Aunt Lucretia. I’ll have to talk to Angie.”

“She’s got plans,” Gianna said quietly.

“*What*?” Connie threw her hands up in disgust. “What kind of plans?”

“I don’t know.” Gianna looked past Connie toward the entrance to the festa grounds. “People are starting to come. I’ll go get the filling. Do we need anything else?”

Their conversation was over, and for the remainder of the *festa* they were too busy to talk. During the warm and sunny daytime, the *festa* drew primarily families. They came for the food and the children’s entertainment and to buy holy cards and medals and saint-related trinkets that would contribute money to the coffers of the church.

At two o’clock, Father Ianelli led the ceremony that concluded with the carrying of the statue of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel from the church to its outdoor pedestal. Papa was among the men selected for the honor of carrying the Virgin, and he stayed just long enough to do his duty and buy two *cannoli* from his daughters, then headed back to the store.

Supper time brought in some families and many couples, including young people ready for an evening of food, games, and music provided by Cousin Tony’s accordion band. Other women from the church came to spell Gianna and Connie, and they took the opportunity to mix with their friends and eat the way from vendor to vendor. Angie had relinquished her spot at the children’s booth long before to join

her own friends as they milled about the grounds.

Connie paired up with Nino's sometimes-girlfriend, Tina, for a game of bocce against Nino and Frankie, while Paul Cefalu stood on the sidelines with a group of rowdy friends and bet on Connie and Tina to win. When they did, he gallantly put his winnings into the mason jar for the benefit of the church, then gave each of them an extended hug and a kiss on the lips. Connie knew that kissing him was something he wouldn't remember the next day—she had seen his glassy eyes and smelled the beer on his breath—but she savored the sensation of being wrapped in his arms and the coveted pleasure of his lips on hers and breathlessly kissed him back.

He lingered for a moment, his eyes roaming over her face as he gave her his slow, seductive smile and Connie's heart sped up. But then Frankie grabbed Paul's arm to pull him away, and he and his friends moved on. Connie chided herself for thinking that anything more might have come from that meaningless kiss and went off to find Gianna.

Daylight was waning. Mamma and Papa arrived, smiling and laughing as they mingled with the friends and neighbors. Gianna went home with a headache brought on by the day's festivities, and suddenly Connie found herself standing alone to one side, watching the people around her.

The intense loneliness that overwhelmed her came as a surprise. How could one be surrounded by friends and family and still feel so terribly alone? She might reproach Gianna for her lack of a boyfriend, but the reality was, Connie had no one special, either. She went out now and then, she had plenty of friends, but she had no one in her life whose presence brought her true excitement, no one to look forward to being with at an event like this. For a brief moment, she regretted turning Nino away, but he wasn't the answer. Neither was Paul Cefalu.

Darkness had descended. The priest distributed boxes of sparklers and asked people to pass them around. The strings of colored lights hanging from booth to booth swayed gently against the night sky as the revelers lit their sparklers with cigarette lighters or matches or ignited them from one sparkler to another. Brilliant silvery light illuminated the happy faces of the *festa*-goers around her, eliciting from Connie an uncomfortable moment of disquiet she couldn't explain. Alone and melancholy, she slipped away from the crowd and headed for home.

CHAPTER THREE

Sunday

The entire family was up for seven o'clock Mass the next morning, making the most of Papa's and Mamma's one day off each week. The five of them walked to and from the church together, and when they returned home, Connie and Gianna made Sunday breakfast while Angie set the table. After eating, Angie washed the dishes and Connie wiped. Gianna had gone outside with the garbage.

"So, *angela mia*," Connie said as she lifted a dish from the drainer, "Nonna needs you to stay with Aunt Lucretia today while she goes to visit somebody in the hospital."

Angie kept her attention on the glass she was rinsing. "Why me?"

"Because you're the only one available. Gigi has a date, and I promised a friend I'd go with her to the museum. It's not fair to ask Mamma or Papa to do it."

"Gigi has a *date*?" Angie's voice was an excited whisper as she gave Connie a devilish grin. "With who?"

"Some seminary friend of Father Ianelli. A wannabe priest who couldn't cut it. How perfect is that?"

Angie turned back to the sudsy water in the sink. "Good for her. Maybe it'll actually work out. And you said you, uh, you're going with a friend to the museum? What museum?"

"The one in St. J." Connie searched for the name. "Wadsworth? Wentworth?"

"Fairbanks. Not even close." She gave Connie a small, knowing smile. "You're not really going anywhere, are you? You just don't want to be stuck with Aunt Lucretia."

"That's not true. I did tell a friend I'd go to the museum with her."

"Some day."

Connie smiled. Angie knew her too well. "Come on, my little angel," she said in her most wheedling voice, "I did my duty this weekend."

Angie picked up another glass and concentrated on scrubbing it. "Well, I wish I could, Con, but I really do have plans for this afternoon that I can't change. Sorry."

"What are you doing?"

"Visiting somebody."

"Who?"

Angie kept her face turned away. "Just... somebody."

A stab of fear shot through Connie. "Why won't you tell me?"

Angie vigorously scrubbed the surface of the glass. "I promised I wouldn't talk about it."

"Do Mamma and Papa know?"

Angie nodded.

"You're sure? Because if you're in trouble, Angie, you know you can talk to me. Or any of us."

Angie straightened her shoulders. "I'm not in trouble; somebody else is. And I can help. I just can't talk about it. I'm sorry, Con. I know you're worried, but I'm okay."

"And Mamma and Papa know, and they're okay with it?"

Angie nodded once more, her back to Connie. "Yes. I promise you. And I'm sorry about Aunt

Lucretia. I really am.”

“I’ll survive.” Connie watched her with growing alarm. It wasn’t like Angie to be evasive. Suddenly babysitting Aunt Lucretia had become the least of Connie’s concerns.

Connie couldn’t get Angie out of her mind as she and Gianna strolled toward Nonna’s duplex that afternoon. “Do you know what this thing with Angie’s all about?”

Gianna looked grim. “No. She won’t say, and neither will Mamma.” Her voice was uncharacteristically breathy, and Connie knew it wasn’t from the exertion of walking.

“Are you okay?”

Gianna nodded, her face tight, her gaze straight ahead. She appeared miserable.

“Are you nervous?”

“Of course,” Gianna said crossly. “Wouldn’t you be?”

An urge to hug her swept over Connie, but she restricted herself to a reassuring pat on the arm. “It’ll be okay. Even if you can’t stand him or he doesn’t like you, it’s no big deal. It’s only an hour or so and it’s over, and you move on. At least Father Ianelli will be there. You won’t be alone with the guy.”

Gianna refused to look at her. “I’m not worried about being alone with him. It’s not like I’m a child, you know.”

“I didn’t mean that you were. But sometimes guys can give you the creeps. Not just you—I mean anybody. I know that feeling.” She glanced at the long dark braid hanging down the center of Gianna’s back and her bright yellow sundress. “Oh, and you look nice, by the way. That’s a good color on you.”

A small, appreciative smile softened Gianna’s expression. “Thanks. And, I’m thinking about getting contact lenses.”

“Really?” Connie’s excitement was genuine. “That’s great!”

“We’ll see. So, what do you do when you’re out with a guy who gives you the creeps?”

Her question pleased Connie. They were making progress. “Well, it only happened to me once. The trouble was, I knew I should never have said yes in the first place, because it didn’t feel right even then. I was just being nice to the guy. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. But that doesn’t work, so don’t do it. If you don’t like this guy, and he asks you out, don’t feel like you have to say yes because you’re being nice.”

“What if I do like him, but he doesn’t ask me out?”

“Then you ask him.”

Gianna’s eyes widened playfully before her face broke into a grin. “Ha! How many guys have you asked out?”

Connie grinned back at her. “None.”

“How many would you like to ask out?”

Connie thought for a moment. Would she actually ask Paul Cefalu to go out with her if she thought she had a chance with him? “Probably none. At least right now.”

“Uh-huh. Nothing like sound advice from an expert.”

They had turned the corner and were half a block away from the duplex.

“How long will you be here?” Gianna asked as they approached their grandmother’s house. “I mean, case I’m done early.” She glanced toward the church in the distance.

Connie scrunched up her nose. “I don’t know. A couple hours, I suppose. I hope she sleeps.”

“Give her a glass of wine. Or two.”

Connie laughed. Hope for Gianna might exist after all.

Aunt Lucretia fell asleep in her recliner after only one glass of wine.

Connie sat on the sofa in the flat’s deathly quiet living room with its Venetian blinds drawn tight against the sunny August afternoon. She studied the eighty-something woman across from her. In some ways, Aunt Lucretia, Aunt Mariana, and Nonna were very much alike. All three wore only a widow’s black day in and day out since the deaths of their husbands, and Connie had never seen any of them in anything but a shapeless black dress, summer or winter. They wore black cotton stockings and identical black, laced-up, old-lady shoes with thick heels, and each kept her steel-gray hair long and tight to her head in either a bun or a pinned-up braid. The similarities ended there, however. When Aunt Lucretia was tall and bony and in ill health, Nonna and Aunt Mariana were stout, relatively healthy, and definitely possessed of better dispositions.

Connie pondered the possibility of ending up that way in her old age—living quietly with Gianna and Angie, their husbands passed on, their children scattered across the country—and knew it would never happen. These women held onto ways that Connie’s generation would never espouse. Still, it was intriguing, and somewhat frightening, to think about how she might end up some day. Would she be the gaunt and sickly middle sister, asleep in a recliner in the middle of the day, snoring loudly with her mouth hanging open? If so, she’d most likely be in a nursing home surrounded by strangers, not at home with one of her sisters’ grandchildren.

The thought softened her annoyance at being there. Lucretia might be grouchy and difficult to tolerate, but she probably had her reasons. And if Connie could ease her great-aunt’s last years by showing up once in a while to keep her company so she could stay in her own home, that wasn’t so much to give.

Connie stood up and traversed the small living room, looking for something to read. Most of the books were in Italian, and their content looked less than exciting. The Aunts and Nonna were not readers of magazines, and they didn’t possess any newspapers that Connie hadn’t already seen. In desperation, she picked up a worn Bible lying on the table next to Aunt Lucretia’s recliner and carried it back to the sofa where stripes of light peeked through the slats of the blinds. A piece of yellowed, ragged-edge paper, folded into quarters, protruded from within the Bible. She lifted the book’s thick cover and carefully unfolded the fragile sheet fastened to its interior by a strip of crackly yellowed tape.

The paper held a family tree, carefully drawn out in black India ink, handwritten in old-fashioned script using a fountain or quill pen. At the top were the names of Connie’s great-great-grandparents followed by lines leading to the names and birth years of their many children. A line joined the son and daughter who eventually married each other and produced eight children of their own, including Giovanna, Lucretia, and Mariana. Five of those children were now deceased, as indicated by a simple cross added next to their names. Three had died without marrying, possibly as children. The others were linked to spouses, and each had produced several offspring.

Connie’s eyes skipped to the ones of most interest to her—the children of her grandparents. Giovanni Albanese and Mario Balestra had produced five children, Papa being number three. Connie knew the story well. Her father’s two older brothers had immigrated to the U.S. during the nineteen thirties

work in the steel mills in Pittsburgh. Twenty-two-year-old Pietro had joined them shortly before World War II began, bringing with him his bride, Sophia. But she hated Pittsburgh, and so they had moved on to Vermont where Papa's two aunts lived with their stonecutter husbands. Papa worked for a green grocer and found it to be a trade that interested him enough to eventually invest in a store of his own.

Mamma's maiden name was written there—Sophia Cruscenti. Connie didn't know her maternal grandparents, even though she was named after that grandmother. They were already elderly and in poor health when Mamma emigrated, and they had never left Italy. Connie had seen fuzzy pictures of them, but that was all. Two of Mamma's sisters lived with their husbands in California and occasionally came to visit with their children, but three other siblings remained in Puglia, on the heel of the Italian boot. Someday, Connie hoped to make enough money to send Mamma back to Italy to reunite with them.

Connie's eyes rested on the line indicating the union of Pietro Balestra and Sophia Cruscenti and the names that branched off from there. Her parents had followed the Italian tradition of naming the children for their ancestors. The first daughter was named after the father's mother, the next after the mother's mother. Additional children were then given the names of the father's and mother's siblings in order of their birth. Thus, every generation bore and perpetuated the family names. As one might expect, this resulted in cousins with the same names, and Connie had a younger cousin in California who was also named Concetta.

Her eyes drifted downward to her own generation.

Gianna Maria, 1945

Concetta Anna, 1948

Mario Carlo, 1950 U

Lucretia Mariana, 1952 U

Hope Marie, 1952

Connie puzzled over the names before her. She knew that her mother had delivered a stillborn boy between Connie and Angie; it was a tragedy from which Mamma had never fully recovered, and she still visited the baby's grave on the anniversary of his death. She also knew that, two years later, her mother had delivered twin girls, and the one they named Lucretia had died shortly after birth. Her small headstone rested beside little Mario's. But she had never really thought about Angie's given name, that it didn't conform to family standards. Why had one twin been given two family names and the other a name that had no precedent on either side—a non-Italian name right down to the “Mario” instead of “Maria”?

The phone rang, and the noise threatened to awaken Aunt Lucretia. Connie folded the paper shut and tucked it back into the Bible, then set the book on the table beside the sofa and hurried into the kitchen where the wall-mounted phone hung.

The caller wanted to speak to her grandmother. Connie scribbled the woman's phone number on a piece of paper she found on the kitchen counter and hung up the phone. Aunt Lucretia called for a glass of water, her nap apparently over. Connie went to the sink, took a glass from the cupboard overhead, and filled it from the tap. She returned to her aunt's side and was handing the water to her when she heard a sound in the kitchen. Someone was attempting to open the locked kitchen door.

Let it be Nonna. Connie hurried into the kitchen once more, ready to welcome her grandmother home. The noisy bolt made a jarring sound as she slid it open before pulling the solid door inward.

A grim-faced Gianna stood in the small upstairs hallway.

Connie stepped back to let her in, unsure what her stricken expression meant. Gianna brushed past and stopped in the center of the spotless linoleum-covered kitchen floor, then rotated to face Connie.

Connie closed the kitchen door and turned to her, her spirits plummeting. "What happened, Gi?"

Gianna's words were barely audible. "I liked him, Connie. And I think he liked me."

"Whew!" Connie let out a sigh of relief. Why did everything with her have to be so difficult? Connie widened her eyes in an effort to inspire some excitement in her older sister. "Cool," she said with an enthusiastic smile. "Did he ask you out?"

Gianna's troubled expression didn't change. "Sort of. He wants to. Except... there's a problem."

"What?"

Gianna shoved her hands into the pockets of her sundress and stared at the floor. "He's... not white."

Connie hoped she had misheard. "Did you say he's not white?"

Gianna nodded.

Connie frowned at her. "What is he? Black? Asian? What?"

"Black."

Confusion overtook Connie; nothing about that made sense. "Father Ianeli set you up with a black guy?"

Gianna nodded once more, her eyes clearly showing her misery as they met Connie's.

Connie did her best to remain composed. "He knows that people around here are not all that tolerant, right?"

Gianna shrugged. "I don't know what he knows. He just likes the guy, and so do I."

Gianna was obviously distressed, and Connie knew her sister would simply withdraw if she sensed the situation was hopeless. Connie drew a deep breath, then rallied and smiled at Gianna. "What's his name?"

Gianna's face immediately lit up. "David Thomas."

"And he's thirty-two?"

"Yes, but he doesn't seem that old. I mean, he's mature and everything, but he's not like old and stodgy or anything. He's very funny. He's got a great sense of humor. And he's very nice. And he looks young. Tall and slim. You know, kind of... ageless."

"So, how come he's not already married?"

"I'm not sure. He's been traveling a lot, after he left the seminary. He said he thought being a priest was what he wanted, but then when he started having doubts, he didn't think it was right to stay, so he left to try to get his head together. He went down south and did some charity work and stuff, but then when the race riots started after Martin Luther King died, he got out of there. He's from around Boston, but he doesn't really want to go back there to live either. So he went to St. Johnsbury."

Gianna's lengthy soliloquy delivered with unabashed enthusiasm made Connie smile. "What does he do in St. Johnsbury?"

"He works at the museum. He's a history and nature buff, and he also knows a lot about engineering so they hired him to set up exhibits and do maintenance and stuff."

“At Fairbanks?” Connie smiled to herself, remembering her conversation with Angie.

“Yeah, at Fairbanks. He wants to take me there next weekend and show me what he does.”

“That’s great, Gigi. I hope you go.”

“But what about Mamma and Papa? And Nonna?” Gianna glanced toward the living room where Aunt Lucretia could be heard calling Connie’s name. “What about her? You know how prejudiced she is.”

“She’s prejudiced against anybody who’s not Italian.” Connie dismissed her aunt’s opinion with a wave of her hand. “She has nothing to say about us. Nonna, I’m not sure about. And maybe Mamma and Papa will surprise us. Who knows? But you need to do what *you* want to do. It’s your life.”

“Yeah, that’s easy to say to someone else.” Gianna tilted her head toward the living room. “She’s calling you.”

Connie went into the living room. Her aunt needed her cane and some assistance getting out of her wheelchair so she could go to the bathroom. Connie helped her, then started back toward the kitchen. As she passed the sofa, her eyes rested for a moment on the Bible beside it.

Gianna was seated at the kitchen table, staring at her own fingertips as they nervously tapped the tabletop.

“Gi, do you remember when the twins were born?”

“November, 1952.”

“No, I mean, do you remember anything about it?”

Gianna’s voice was listless. “Not much. I remember the doctor made Ma stay in bed before they were born, and Nonna came from Pittsburgh to take care of us.”

“That must have been hard on Ma and Pa, having another baby die.”

Gianna’s disinterest in the subject was palpable. “I suppose. I don’t know. That whole thing’s kind of a blur.”

“So, you don’t remember anything?”

“I remember burying Lucia. And I remember how crazy you were about Angie. I thought you’d be jealous, but you weren’t.”

“I wish I could remember more.” Connie tilted her head and frowned, trying to sharpen the foggy picture in her mind. “I remember being sent away for a while... weren’t we sent away? To stay with Aunt Mariana or somebody while Ma was in labor?”

“Yeah, Nonna sent us away. She delivered the babies. We spent the night with Aunt Mariana and Uncle Phil. Teresa was like twelve or something, and she was mean. I remember her telling you to stop crying for your mamma, that you weren’t going to be the baby anymore, and you’d better grow up.” Gianna turned her face toward Connie. “Why?”

“Well, I was looking at this Bible in the living room, and it’s got a family tree with everybody on it and Angie’s name doesn’t fit.”

Gianna gave Connie a look of exasperation, as if she were being purposely obtuse. “That’s because her name isn’t really Angie. You’re the one who insisted on calling her Angela.”

“No, I’m talking about her real name. Nobody in the family is named Hope. Hope isn’t even a saint’s name. Did you ever hear of a St. Hope? Catholics have to have saints’ names.”

Gianna shook her head as she rose to her feet. “Maybe Faith, Hope, and Charity don’t count.” She

turned toward the back door, obviously distracted by her own concerns. “Connie, how am I going to tell Ma and Pa about David?”

“You’ll have to just tell them. They’re going to want to meet him before they let you go out. You can let them be surprised when he shows up. That could be awful.”

“What if they say no?” Gianna chewed on her lower lip; she looked like she was about to cry.

“Then you have to make a decision about how you want to live your life.”

“You mean, like you? Like the guy you want to ride with to UVM, but he has to meet Papa first? Why don’t you just tell them you’re going to ride with him, and that’s that?”

“I just might.”

“Yeah, when hell freezes over.”

Aunt Lucretia was calling from the bathroom. Connie went to help her, and when she returned to the kitchen, Gianna had left the duplex.

Nonna came home forty-five minutes later, ready for a nap of her own, and Connie hurried back to her house. She found Gianna in the store’s fenced-in backyard, dressed in shorts and a sleeveless top, stretched out on a chaise lounge in the late afternoon sun. Her eyes were closed, her face impassive. Her dark hair was curled around her head once more.

Connie settled into a webbed chair beside her. “Have you talked to Ma and Pa yet?”

Gianna spoke without opening her eyes. “Mrs. Conti was inside, having coffee with Mamma when I got home. I haven’t seen Papa.”

Connie slid lower in the chair, turned her face toward the sky, and closed her eyes. She had no idea how her parents would react to Gianna seeing a black guy. On the one hand, they never said anything derogatory about people of other races. On the other hand, Mamma’s reaction to Connie riding with Greg Fairchild, an unknown from across town, had been immediate and negative.

Greg Fairchild. The probability of commuting with him to UVM was pretty remote. He lived too far away for her to casually bump into him on the street and talk about it. Calling his house seemed too forward; she didn’t know him that well. She would have to drive herself at first, and if they bumped into each other on campus, they could explore the possibility then—or not.

A shadow cut off the sunlight warming Connie’s face, and Mamma’s voice broke into her thoughts. “I’m making manicotti for supper. I need help.”

Connie and Gianna left their places in the sun and followed her up the stairs to the kitchen. The smell of freshly made marinara sauce hung in the air. Papa sat in the living room, watching his favorite TV program, *Victory at Sea*; Angie had yet to come home.

Connie mixed the ricotta, grated cheese, and eggs to make the filling, while Gianna helped Mamma roll out the pasta dough that waited in a bowl on the table. When Papa’s program ended, he came into the kitchen to sit at the table while the women assembled the stuffed pasta tubes.

“Tell us about the young man you met,” Mamma said to Gianna. “How was he?”

Gianna kept her eyes on the filling she was spreading over the dough with the back of a spoon. “He was nice.”

“What’s his name?”

“David Thomas.”

Mamma nodded. “That doesn’t sound Italian.”

“It’s not. Is that important?”

“Not so much.” Mamma looked at Papa to gauge his expression. “We are in America, right? These things can happen.”

Papa nodded silently; he was on the verge of falling asleep in his chair. Gianna kept her attention on the manicotti.

“You don’t say much,” Mamma persisted. “You don’t like him?”

Gianna set down her spoon and proceeded to roll the dough into a tube. “Actually, I do. He’s very nice. He seems like ... he’d be a good person to know.”

“Then, why the long face? He doesn’t ask to see you again?”

Connie watched Gianna press her lips together and draw in a long breath. “Not exactly,” Gianna said. “But he might. He talked about showing me where he works, at the natural history museum in St. Johnsbury.”

Mamma smiled and reached out to rest her floury hand on Gianna’s arm. “Then, this is good, right? You would go?”

Gianna met Connie’s eyes across the table before turning her gaze on her mother. “I’d like to.”

Mamma made a quizzical face and pulled her shoulders up to her ears. “So?”

“There’s something about him you need to know,” Gianna said.

Mamma’s shoulders dropped, and her expressive eyes widened dramatically. “He’s not Catholic.”

“Mamma, he was going to be a *priest*,” Gianna said with a frown.

Mamma’s jaw dropped. “He’s married before.”

Gianna let out a sigh of frustration. “No, Ma, he’s black.”

Papa’s head came up; he was no longer asleep.

“What does it mean, black?” Mamma asked Gianna.

“He’s Afro-American. *Un uomo di colore.*”

Mamma sat silently staring at her, her eyes unblinking, her expression stunned.

Connie’s gaze shifted from her mother to her father. Papa was combing his bushy mustache with the fingers of one hand, his face solemn as he watched Gianna.

Gianna looked at Mamma and then Papa. “Somebody say something, okay?”

Papa spoke in Italian. “This is not a good thing, Gianna.”

Gianna’s expression hardened. “Why? What have you got against black people?”

“What do *I* have against black people?” Papa’s soft brown eyes concentrated on her face. “This is not about me. What do you think those riots are about that are happening right now in this country? Black people against white people. The races don’t mix.”

“That’s not happening here. This is Vermont.”

“This is Vermont.” Papa’s forehead creasing into a frown. “What does that mean?”

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