

CHAPTER ONE

MY CHILDHOOD

Lawrence and Laura Lombardi arrived into this world on July 4, 1970, at 6:30 p.m. Our family was one of great privilege. Friends always referred to us as “old money” because mother descended from relatives of Thomas Jefferson who settled in Henrico County, Virginia. Through hard work and bright choices, her ancestors climbed the ladder of tremendous success.

My parents, Caleb and Martha, or Cal and Mimi as more affectionately known, radiated an air of knowledge and sophistication. They enjoyed their lives of wealth and comfort as they shared the Christian faith; they frequently stated.

“To whom much is given, much is expected.”

Both of my parents were heavily involved in the community while they officiated or attended charity events with generous contributions to selected causes. They remained involved and busy in these chosen activities until their deaths.

Lars and I both returned from boarding school to spend the required two months together with our family that fateful season. Summers always created heavenly times for me. Our home ensured perfection.

Pleasant hours crammed with sailing, biking, and swimming. We enjoyed long lunches on a wooden farmhouse table behind our sprawling house. Friends showed up uninvited knowing a welcome waited. Everyone received passionate salutations. Our entire talented staff prepared enough food no matter how many showed. All ingredients came from local farmers. Everything tasted delicious. My mother told me the meals which they turned out received discussion during the long winters. My father said that was the way his family dined in Italy most days after his parents retired.

This particular summer was my tenth. I remember well the sound of the doorbell which awakened me from sleep early on a weekday morning. Answering the door, I reacted in shock at seeing a uniformed man holding his cap in hand. He calmly explained.

“Mr. and Mrs. Lombardi’s plane crashed into the ocean.”

The official refused to look at me. Never did he raise his eyes as he informed me that the authorities failed to recover their bodies. I closed the door and screamed. No one could stop my wails until tears overcame me. Lawrence laughed. He said I was a spoiled baby and always had been my parent's favorite. His life appeared beautiful, so those words surprised me. This memory is essential for me because that was the moment when I accepted something was wrong with the way my brother related to me. Since I could remember, I believed that was true.

We grew up in one of the large homes on Narragansett Bay in Newport, Rhode Island. A small staff ran our lives managing to keep us peaceful. Until the age of ten, my brother and I thought everyone lived similarly. That was the summer strangers informed us we would both be leaving home for different locations upon the sudden death of our family. Dad already had sent Lars to boarding school because he said Lars could not control himself. Now, I, too, would be leaving for what I thought was a prep school in the fall. Our futures received no explanations. I assumed it would not happen. Dad always lived in denial about one thing and then the other, we never took his threats seriously. Suddenly, after his death, one fall morning, our luggage sat packed by the front door. Herded to our respective futures by our driver, Stefan, we loaded into our car. Lars went to Philips Academy, I to the airport.

My father was Italian and often returned to his home outside of Rome during his life. Never were we included in those visits which did seem strange. Still, my parents were wealthy and eccentric with fussy ancestry. I was impressed with my mother’s history until my father explained he could trace his heritage back to the thirteen hundreds. They appeared a strange couple. Our money was mostly from Father's family. Cal and Mimi were “trust fund babies” as are Lars and I.

To this day, I remember the fear in my brother's blue eyes as our chauffeur removed his luggage quickly escorting him into the grand building. Expelled from the previous boarding school, Lars could not go back so now he moved again. Everything happened quickly. We had never met our so-called guardian at any time during our young lives. The servants told us bits and pieces of what was occurring. Lars turned to look at me with the look of a scared child but quickly became his typical hard self. He laughed and yelled.

"I never cared for any of you, especially you, Laura."

Then he turned on his heel and walked away with Stefan. I guess Stefan just walked Lars inside and left. Our driver was back inside the car in less than ten minutes.

"Now, let's get you to the airport, Missy. Finally, we will have some peace at your home. No one is happier to see you leave since the loss of your parents. Their will explained explicitly; your home will not be sold but maintained as if you were still one big, happy family—which we all know was not the case—that is until you and Lars reach the age of twenty-one. Your parents talked for some time about their plans for you to visit your Aunt Sophia. It all occurred sooner than expected. I think you will like her. I'm sure because even your mother liked her."

Mother exhibited a fondness for no one.

Looking back, I guess Stefan believed that he showed kindness to me. Although sometimes difficult to accept this happened, these people were a hardcore group of adults. The driver didn't utter another word until he parked at the airport. I fell asleep out of boredom. It appeared apparent, Stefan looked at my brother and me as "being in the way." The other servants probably felt the same. Expertly, he parked our car. I became terrified. My mother once said I would love Italy. Sophia and my father were twins just as Lars and I, but their relationship was powerful. Lars and I never were close.

"I was the first to be born."

Lars never forgot to remind me. He told me he was the “smartest and the best looking because he was the dominant twin.” I never doubted this. He rated as the most beautiful boy anyone in Newport ever witnessed. At least, those were the words I heard. He developed tall, slender with the Italian darkness, but his hair was a blond. Intensely blue eyes peered from shaggy light hair. Naturally white teeth shamed all of us. His were natural without whitening. Lars resembled my father’s family except for the blond hair and light eyes.

I, however, reflected the spitting image of my mother who stood medium built, thin, and constantly battled the sun from freckling. Both of us struggled with fair skin and reddish hair. Unlike Lars, my teeth were not perfect. Such fractured thoughts filled my head as I fearfully glared into the face of Stefan.

“Come on, let’s get this over. We don’t have a lot of time to get everything done, and you deposited to the proper gate. Important plans for this evening call me. If only we could get rid of old Mr. Snider. He thinks he owns *our* home.”

Stefan appeared to speak to himself.

The driver roughly pulled me from the confines of my comfy, leather seat. Grumbling, he removed my Louis Vuitton luggage. People turned with stares. Rudely, Stefan maneuvered my way through the airport while he continued to complain that my guardian could have chartered a private plane but now ran a “tight ship.” I looked at my designer luggage and plans of spending my childhood with Aunt Sophia in Rome.

I wondered.

What sort of youth did he enjoy?

Soon, we arrived at the gate. Almost instantly, a flight attendant gently squeezed my hand. With kindness, she smiled whispering to me there was no need to worry. We strolled away. I didn’t even turn back to look at Stefan. I heard him yell.

“You ungrateful kid. You could have thanked me for all I have done for you!”

I continued to walk to the plane for early boarding. I tried remembering to what Stefan might be referring but could only picture him driving us around, which I was sure he was paid nicely to do.

My life changed in the blink of an eye while the plane soared high into the bright blue sky. The fear which penetrated my every pore caused me to feel sick. I tried to read my book on *Italian Art and Literature*.

My thoughts challenged me to remember Aunt Sophia. When I was very young, I barely recalled her visits to Newport. Once, she recovered from a face-lift while she stayed with us. My memory was that

she was kind enough but not overly friendly. My aunt did not like Lawrence even saying once he was “a bad egg.” I thought he “hung the moon” even though not at all kind to me. I hated to hear anyone speak unkindly about my brother. It didn’t matter to me that he regularly showered me with unkind words and actions.

After flying all night, we arrived in Rome early on a fall morning. The trauma of the past few weeks had lulled me to sleep as we soared above the clouds; I felt exhausted. Although I didn't know what waited for me, at least, I left the bullying from Lars at home.

An early September day shined through the old windows of the airport while the warmth of the sun blazed outside. A new lady now held my hand as we ascended old, worn stairs. Everything was a blur. The bright blue of the sky contrasted with the dark green of the shrubs outside the Italian airport glass. The scenery looked just like Newport, but I had arrived in another world, one of which I held no expectations. I figured a driver might pick me up, so I attempted to read the placards people carried while strolling to— what? I had no idea what to expect.

“Laura, Laura, is that you?”

Suddenly, a woman enveloped me in arms doused with a light heather fragrance. Much more beautiful than Father, vaguely, I recognized Aunt Sophia. Dark auburn streaks blazed from this spunky brunette. Brilliant teeth glowed white like Lars'. She reminded me of my brother because she was tall and thin. Long, beautiful hair fell in flowing sheets around her dark face and brown eyes. Impeccably dressed, she looked as if she just arrived from a fine resort which was impossible at such an early hour. Handmade sandals, adorned with bright jewels, matched the scarf around her neck shimmering with the softest turquoise silk. Matching the color of the sky, her flowing dress mingled with silver threads. I desired to be just like her; she was gorgeous.

“You poor darling, you must be frightened? Yes? Sending you alone like this, I question the wisdom of my brother's chosen guardian, Mr. Snider. Did they explain things to you? No?”

I had no idea what to say. The only thing certain was my forced exit from my home to live with her. The length of time or arrangements must not be worthy of discussion because no one bothered explaining anything to me. Since Sophia already criticized my guardian, Mr. Snider, who was my father's beloved attorney, I did not want to give her more ground. I nodded my head in agreement. She did not pursue.

After we retrieved my luggage, she pushed everything on a small cart. Quietly, she led me to her bright blue Fiat. It was the color of the sky! I wondered if she had room for the entire set of luggage? Expertly, she loaded the convertible car. We set off!

“Laura, you do understand that you will be living with me for many years. Yes? You will receive education in our home. We live not so far outside of Rome on vineyards owned by our family for generations. I have converted one of the buildings behind our home into a classroom. Your tutor is the best in Rome. He will live in a servant's cottage also behind us. Please, know that I have and always will have only the best intentions for you. Don't be fearful. You will be my daughter. You see, I never had children. My dear husband François—he was French, you know—he died many years ago. Since that day, I have had many loves

but will never marry again. My life is full. I love music and painting. My, our, home is filled with music, flowers, and art. Life for me is charmed. I desire to teach you all of my *Life Lessons* to ensure you also learn how to live a happy, well-rounded life. Don't ever be timid in discussing needs. Although I will not spoil you; your happiness is most important."

The next thing I remember, we drove down a long road covered in old, faded brown cobblestones. Sophia explained, as we passed through a substantial black wrought iron fence, "You don't need to be afraid. Besides the gated entrance," she softly continued, "heavy fencing surrounds the entire five hundred-year-old estates." I already felt safe but completely overwhelmed. "There exists little crime here," she mentioned, "but I do take every precaution for safety."

We passed under the most beautiful trees. They made a natural arch which Sophia explained were olive trees; they looked ancient. Also surrounding the house or villa towered stately, tall cedar trees as well as laced cypress trees, all swayed gently in the soft, fragrant wind. Deeply, I breathed the luxuriant freshness.

Sophia appeared excited to share her home. Suddenly, we turned the corner; we faced a most imposing mansion. The two-story beauty displayed the color of pale gold with bright white trim. Balconies and balustrades encompassed it. The West wind blew gently into my face while I looked at my new home. After she parked the Fiat, in front of the villa, we continued to sit and admire the incredible structure.

When Sophia described the history of *Belvedere*, I was awestruck. It seemed that my new home stood on the ancient site of a Roman senator's villa. My aunt continued that the original Roman tunnels crossed beneath the property. The beauty of the day soothed as I tried to take it all in. Sheepishly, I asked if the house was safe since it stood over the ancient tunnels. She threw her back, just the way Father used to do, and laughed a hearty laugh. I thought of my father and wondered why Sophia received this incredible property instead of the only son of the family. Why would anyone turn away the opportunity to live fourteen

miles southeast of Rome in the Alban Hills inside this lovely ninth century village?

So many questions came to my mind. Intuitively, Sophia inquired if I had any worries. Carefully, I asked in my best Italian—my father had insisted that Lars, and I learn it—could we please go into the village soon.

“Oh yes, of course, we will. You will love Frascati. The entire region is called the Lazio region of central Italy.”

My aunt started to remove the luggage when a small man with a dark jacket and white shirt walked toward us. Aunt Sophia introduced me to Geppé. Instantly a connection developed. He was not much taller than me. The man looked very wizened by the elements. We merely smiled at each other, but I knew.

I just made a friend!

Sophia noticed our smiles. Gently remarking that she believed, “Geppé has always lived here.” This small man seemed essential to Sophia; she would be unable to run the vineyards and house without him, she explained.

“If you are very kind to Geppé, I believe that he will take you for a ride on the tractor and explain all of the histories of this grand home, your home.”

She smiled that toothy smile. My heart melted. “Geppé how much land is this?”

Quietly, I asked.

He seemed slow to respond. Then, in perfect English, he replied.

“Our vineyards are not large. They are thirty acres of vines, but the wine is the best in the region. Do you drink wine?”

He smiled.

“Oh, not so often.”

“How far are we from Rome, Geppé?”

“Well, we are only about forty minutes, but the time can vary according to the traffic. You will see tractors all over these hills. Have you ever ridden on a tractor?”

“Oh, no, but I would like it very much.”

Never, will I forget the happiness which consumed me. Lawrence, Cal, and Mimi became fading memories. We had never been close. Honestly, I always felt as if Lars or Lawrence and I were mere inconveniences, not at all wanted.

My life has just improved.

I wondered what Lawrence was experiencing. He had always been difficult to understand. Quietly, I realized an overwhelming fear disintegrated. That fear had been deep inside, but now it evaporated. The concern that I harbored pertained to Lars.

Why?

I asked myself, but I was too happy to ponder such old threats.