

(from) Chapter One

If not for her father's passport, defaced but not destroyed, Francesca never would have surfaced. She would have remained a woman lost to history, her story swallowed in the depths of the Detroit River off Belle Isle.

The passport was issued in 1914, during the reign of King Vittorio Emanuele III, just fifty-three years after the patriot-soldier Giuseppe Garibaldi led the resurgence that unified a patchwork of city-states into a country called Italy. My family left Italy for America with a single passport. Issued to my great-grandfather, it included my great-grandmother and their children, listed in birth order on its inside pages. It was a time when women and children were considered a man's property, when he expected his bride to be a virgin and their blood-stained wedding sheets were hung in the living room to prove it. It was a time when, married or single, Italian men flaunted their sexual prowess but a family's honor was bound up in the chastity of its women.

I saw the passport only once, in 1993, but the secret ancestor it had concealed for nearly eighty years instantly became my obsession.

In many families there are secrets. In Italian families generations go to their graves without divulging those secrets. My mother had never breathed a word about her mother's ill-fated sister Francesca, not even to my father. Despite their forty years together as soul mates, he died without ever hearing a whisper of the scandal.

Obsessed, yet fearful of family reprisals for searching out their secret, I fought to piece together my great-aunt's story. A guarded snippet was divulged here, a reluctant dribble there, then basta! no

more. At times, my mother's and her sisters' and their cousins' resistance seemed impregnable, made worse because I needed them as go-betweens to Francesca's siblings -- their parents. I could no more force myself to press my grandmother on a subject that caused her so much pain than I could force myself to obey my mother and "let it go!" In the face of my own escalating horror, I remained fixated on ferreting out the truth about Frances' life, and her death.

She haunted me.

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Detroit, 1995

On the morning of Gramma Mazzarino's funeral, a framed 8 x 10 photograph was sneaked onto a side table near her casket. It went unnoticed by me -- by most mourners -- since for three days the viewing room had been jammed with people, flowers, and the numerous photos on display as a pictorial essay of my grandmother's life.

As we exited our cars at the cemetery, my cousin Anthony came rushing over to me, his eyes wide with astonishment. Like his sisters, he knew the paltry bits and pieces I'd managed to gather about Frances -- I'd told them.

"Did you see the picture?" he breathed. He didn't have to say another word. Instinctively, I knew exactly whose picture and how it got there. His mother, Grace, had quietly brought Frances, in her sole surviving photograph, to her elder sister Josie's funeral.

"Where?"

"My ma took it off the credenza. Grandma and Grandpa's wedding picture. It's in the trunk of my parents' car."

I knew my grandparents' wedding picture. They were the only two in it.

I tracked down my aunt the minute we arrived at the postburial

luncheon, and asked her for the photo. She feigned ignorance, then waved me off, claiming to have no idea where it was. Realizing it was then or never, I scoured the throng of friends and relatives for her husband.

"Uncle Sam, may I borrow your car keys for a second? There's something I need to get from your trunk."

Alone in the parking lot that October afternoon, I popped open their trunk and took a deep breath. And then I turned over the face-down picture frame and I "met" Gramma's hidden sister for the first time.

Light glowing from her face and with a huge floppy bow tying back her long hair, Frances (as she came to be called in America) peeked out at me in black and white from my grandparents' wedding portrait. Unlike in the hand-colored portrait of my grandparents in their Sunday best that my mother had always told me was her parents' wedding photo, this one showed my twenty-five year-old grandfather, Nino, sporting a proper tuxedo and boutonniere and my fifteen year-old grandmother, Josie, sitting frothed in bridal gown and veil balancing an armload of jumbo mums. Sandwiched between them stand Frances and another of the younger sisters, Mary.

The play of light across the black and white portrait consistently pulls the eye to her small face. Her expression keeps me there. With a direct and open gaze, she peers at me across time like a lovely little ghost. Her eyes are large and round and penetrating. Oval and sweet, her face is demure, almost wistful, so young and so innocent.

She is captured on film on the brink of womanhood, frozen forever at September, 1916. She is two years removed from Sicily and two years younger than the elder sister who on that day had married for love.

That day I stood staring down at thirteen year-old Francesca with my heart pounding. She compelled me to hunt down her story. She still does.