

## CHAPTER SIX

*O Fortuna!*

Three years earlier . . .

November 9, 1984

Staten Island

“Before I got married, I used to be a fun and interesting person.”

Mom sat on the overstuffed green couch in the living room of our semi-attached house, flipping through several photo albums chronicling her multiple 1960s excursions to Europe. She had used funds left over from her full-tuition college scholarships to see England, Italy, Greece, Spain, and France. She traveled in the company of childhood and college friends, none of whom she had seen since marrying my father, Vincent Cavalieri junior. Coiffed like Jackie Kennedy, Mom wore then-trendy fashions in the faded color photographs: canary yellow women’s pantsuits, electric blue matching blouse and skirt sets, and lots of plaid. The Gianna Basile in these photos was twenty years younger than Gianna Cavalieri but had the same “Betty Boop”-look. I fancied we strongly resembled each other. I was in third grade, the youngest and tallest boy in ALEC, with brown hair parted on the side, a slightly crooked nose, large-but-pinned-back ears, and arched eyebrows. I wore oversized brown plastic glasses, brown corduroy pants, and a “space age” turquoise and white pullover. I touched my eight-year-old finger to a ginger-bread cottage snapshot. “Is this Asterix the Gaul’s house?”

Pointed roof cottages, well-manicured lawns and gardens, and low stone walls filled four pages of photos, placing Mom and her besties in a fairy tale England come alive. “That’s the Cotswolds,” Mom sighed. “Of course, it would be too expensive for us to go now.” She reached for the table lamp beside her and turned it on. Night was falling. We could see the sun setting through the sliding doors that led out to our backyard deck and above-ground pool. We lived in a semi-attached home with a railroad apartment feel on the main level. The wood-paneling and soft blue, plush carpeted combined earth tones with cool colors to give our family room a womb-like effect. Across the room, a painting of Ichabod Crane racing across the Pocantico River Bridge

to escape the Headless Horseman hung over our TV and VHS stand.

As Mom flipped through the album, I saw Polaroids of buildings built of stone and marble during Ancient Rome, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. These glorious edifices, centuries old, stood in majestic rebuke of the family homes of Staten Island, made of anything but Roman marble. Nobly designed for the working-classes and the lower-middle-classes — that is to say, people exactly like us — the homes of Staten Island had a cookie-cutter feel. I was grateful for the affordable housing, but disappointed that “affordable housing” meant, by necessity, “uninspired housing,” since street after street of Staten Island looked exactly the same, like Privet Drive in Little Whinging, Surrey. Imagine if the architects of the Cotswolds or San Gimignano had designed the stretches of Staten Island intended for the upwardly mobile urban poor? Sadly, American architecture is Puritanical: functional and cheap, not useful and beautiful.

I felt trapped in Staten Island. I wanted to see Italy, but the European countries featured in Mom’s photo albums seemed as far away to me as Mars and as fictional as Oz. In fact, given Mom’s grouching about money and marriage, I was now convinced I would never see Europe. Her rhetoric had been too fatalistic and too effective by half. Oz was now far more real and attainable than the Cotswolds. If wanted to travel, I would have to travel in my imagination, via science fiction, fantasy, and horror popular fiction. I could travel in the TARDIS with the Doctor by watching *Doctor Who* or on the Starship Enterprise with Kirk, Spock, and McCoy by watching *Star Trek*. Any time I wanted New York to be more welcoming or whimsical than it was, I could read about the alternate reality New York of Marvel Comics, where Doctor Strange lived in Greenwich Village, Spider-Man in Queens, and the Fantastic Four and Avengers in Manhattan. Conversely, if I wanted to confront everything I hated about New York and modern America, I could read serious, respectable literature about it, or watch Spike Lee and Martin Scorsese films. There was plenty of time to read bleak novels and watch depressing arthouse movies when I got older. Back then, I preferred Marvel’s New York to the moral ambiguities of the *real* New York and its artistic representations. Mom’s taste was the reverse. She wanted to see her life reflected in art. She had no time

for “the stuff you and your dad like with robots and mummies in it.”

Mom reached her photos of Greece. “When you go to college, you must study abroad.”

“Yes, Mom. I want to.” *How?*

To my amusement and discomfort, Mom stumbled upon some photos of her college boyfriends: Three Persian men studying at Long Island University on student visas, all of whom were part of a resistance movement against the Shah. Mom pointed at a swarthy, fit man in sunglasses. “That’s Kamran. When I first met him, I told him the emerald ring he wore was lovely. He just took it off and handed it to me! He told me that Persian custom demanded you offer a possession as a gift to a person who expresses admiration for it. I had to accept it from him or risk insulting him.” Kamran seemed like a nice enough fellow, though it was a blurry and grainy photo of him. I blinked several times to make it out better. No, it wasn’t my eyesight.

“You should have told him you liked his car,” I joked.

*If Mom had married Kamran instead of Vincent Cavalieri, Jr., would I even exist?* Good thing this handsome fellow hadn’t won Mom over for more than a brief romantic interlude. And yet, dad’s approval rating was tanking these days, while Kamran’s was on the rise, if for no other reason than nostalgia. As Mom switched albums to photos from three decades earlier, when she was a baby and a young girl, my brother Leo came into the room. At five, he was three years younger than me and had a full-on-adorable-male-Betty-Boop-face. I enjoyed hugging and kissing him far too much, but he was so dang cute. Leo arrived in time to glimpse pictures of Mom looking more like Shirley Temple than ever in black-and-white. We also saw Uncle Carmine at eighteen, a slim, Italian Elvis Presley, instead of the chubbier, Paul-Sorvino-meets-Ralph-Kramden figure of today. Then there were the photos of my grandparents, and Bianca and Baby Bianca, of toddler “Alexa Hente” and his twin, Gabriel. As Mom looked at the youthful faces, playing in parks in Brooklyn, sunbathing on the roofs of tenements, and swimming in Lake Hopatcong, she mourned the past and cried freely. She pointed to a bald man I didn’t recognize who had his shirt off and wore a gold crucifix about his neck. “That’s one of my uncles. He died when I was ten. He had something curable, but he never went

to the doctor in his life. He waited too long to get treatment, and it killed him. Almost my entire family is dead.”

Leo leaned in and frowned at the photos. “These are all the dead Italians who matter so much more to you than we do?” It was a surprisingly bitter and psychologically insightful question from a five-year-old, but Leo had been well-prepped to ask it, given how regularly Mom had gone through this photo album ritual over the past year. She had done it *a lot*. Thanks to her tone deafness and a dying hearing aid battery, Mom didn’t hear Leo’s question. He shook his head in sad, angry confusion and walked away. Unfortunately, Leo was right to feel neglected. Recently, Mom had grown so mired in the past that she no longer occupied the present day as completely as we did. It was understandable. She had just suffered the devastating loss of her father, Angelo. Mom had worshipped the man. Even though I’d only known him as a frail, irascible figure, I had some sense of why. I have many memories of Grandpa Angelo sitting in the backyard on a folding chair, his shirt off in the summer heat, watching me run around the sloping grass, throwing a football in the air to myself and failing to catch it on the way back down. He would also sit in front of the house on the same folding chair as I’d shoot basketball hoops by myself. As I played, he would work on the newspaper crossword puzzle of the day, wearing his glasses on a chain around his neck, but using them only when he couldn’t make out a line of small newsprint. If Tony Nocerino and the Merry Men from Buchanan Avenue would wander into our Orthodox Jewish neighborhood on Kell Avenue and give me a hard time, Grandpa would get up out of his chair, wave his fist at them and yell, “Get away from him, you dumb sons of bitches!” Then they’d scurry off.

When Grandpa had the chance to, he’d make spaghetti and meatballs using an old recipe for gravy that involved tomato paste, garlic, olive oil, Italian seasonings, a dash of red wine, and two cans of peeled tomatoes. (Apologies to Peter Clemenza and Mario Batali: Grandpa did not use any sugar.) He enjoyed buying fresh food imported from Italy that was a little higher end than Mom’s consistent repertoire of spaghetti, rigatoni, fusilli, fettucine, and ravioli. His menu included calamari, mussels, egg creams, and wine. Mom liked to live under her

means and never met a credit card statement she didn't pay off instantly. Her father was poorer, but slightly more extravagant. During Easter 1983, Grandpa found two giant chocolate bunnies for my brother and I. Mom balked at her father spending so much on chocolate. Grandpa looked first at the bunnies, then Leo's cherubic face, then mine. "I like to see how happy they look when they each eat their own bunny." Mom felt like a killjoy, but also boundless love for her father.

To hear Mom tell it, her relationship with Grandpa was so untroubled, they only had one disagreement. Mom was the first member of her family to go to college, which was why Grandpa was not prepared when she broached the subject of enrolling in Long Island University in 1960. "College!" he exclaimed. "What for? It's a breeding ground for degenerates." However, Mom told him firmly she wanted to go. He backed down once he understood how serious she was. Mom loved literature and wanted to study it but didn't want to move away from her family to get the degree. She won a full scholarship to LIU, a school reachable from their 64<sup>th</sup> street apartment in Brooklyn via public transportation. Mom studied there from 1961 to 1965. Between the full scholarship and an additional Regents College Scholarship, she was provided more than enough money to earn her bachelor's and master's, travel to Europe, and come within striking distance of a doctorate in English. As fulfilling as these experiences were, they were tainted by tragedy. Mom's mother, Francesca Basile, died suddenly on Aug 11, 1963, radically undercutting Mom's baseline capacity for happiness.

At Francesca's wake, Mom's maternal grandmother and aunt seemed to blame LIU for killing Francesca. Maybe they blamed Mom herself for Francesca's death.

"If only you hadn't won that scholarship..." Her portly, black-veil-wearing grandmother let the unfinished sentence hang in the air.

Mom's portly, black-veil wearing aunt nodded in sad agreement.

Mom was too stunned to reply.

The inference was clear. Mom had accidentally murdered her own mother by winning a college scholarship. She was being condemned by a fatalistic Southern Italian superstition — there is a finite amount of good luck in the world, so be careful not to use up your family's

portion too soon. Will the jealous place an evil eye upon the family? Will the Wheel of Fortune turn again and crush us all? Good news often felt much the same as bad news to those with this mindset.

Thankfully, Mom's cousin, Emily Basile-Scrosciare, overheard the grandmother and aunt, and swooped in to offer a more scientific view of Francesca's passing. Young Emily was the newly minted Wall Street stockbroker of the family. She would eventually retire at forty-one by making a killing in investments and not blowing it all on hedonistic partying as many of her male colleagues did. To my knowledge, no one ever accused Emily of bringing misfortune down upon the family by doing so well in her career. Of course, she did have to deal with her share of jealousy from the rest of the family and was sometimes viewed as standoffish. For my part, I'll always be grateful to her for trying to save my mother from being burdened by supernatural guilt. On the night of the wake, Emily reassured Mom that a college scholarship had not murdered Francesca. In fact, Grandma Francesca was a chain-smoker and compulsive cleaner who used harsh chemicals and cleaning agents to wash and wax the floor of her 64<sup>th</sup> street apartment every day. "I saw Francesca scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees day in and day out," Emily explained. "Coughing, breathing in poisonous fumes, and smoking. I said to her, 'You're gonna poison yourself breathing all that stuff in every day!' Francesca said back, 'If it kills me, it kills me. I want a clean house.' Watching her do that made me vow never to become a housewife. I'm not dying for a clean house. And I'd never be a smoker, either." After hearing Emily's story, Mom's brain understood that Emily was right. Grandma Francesca's lung cancer probably came from both her smoking and the cleaning agents, not an evil curse brought down from on high because Mom had dared go to college. Mom's heart, however, rejected Emily's theory and embraced the supernatural explanation that placed the blame squarely upon her head.

I wouldn't get to know Emily until years later, when I was eight and she was nearing retirement. Even at eight, Emily's poise, expensive clothes, expertly applied make-up, perfect teeth, and slender figure impressed me. She is one of the few centered, happy, and successful people I have ever met. Thinking of her now, I wonder: Who in their

right mind would pick Francesca's life path instead of Emily's? Die from breathing noxious fumes during housework or retire wealthy and gorgeous at forty? Was that, essentially, the choice that awaited all women? Throughout my childhood, Mom strove to be an uncomfortable combination of the two: career woman, housewife, and mother all in one. Nineteen-eighty-three was the year the effort to walk the toughest path of all began to break my mother.

Mom's graduate school and career plans hadn't panned out as she expected. Within a few years of graduating college and going to graduate school at New York University, Mom had reached the stage when she had finished all of her courses and it was time for her to read several hundred books to prepare for her various subject area comprehensive exams. Of course, she was eager to begin her teaching career and make some money and had recently landed a job teaching writing courses at Fordham University as an adjunct. She went to the chair of the English Department at NYU and asked for a leave of absence, during which she could gradually read all the books on her reading list and still teach on the side. She was, as it happens, exhausting herself keeping up with both adjunct teaching and fulfilling her obligations as a graduate student. The chair of the department said soberly, "You can rest when you are dead." Mom replied, "I'm not that tired," and withdrew from the program. She never completed her doctorate in English.

Fortunately for Mom, she found full-time employment at a city university which, after a large shakeup that included a merger and the institution of the revolutionary multicultural policy of open enrollment, became New York City Technical College. She wound up teaching composition, remedial writing, and first-year literature courses there for twenty-five years. All in all, Mom's career as both a student and teacher in the New York higher education system was shaped by the changing fortunes of the humanities majors from the sixties through the eighties. Thanks to the Cold War and fears that the Russians were gaining ground on the United States technologically and via the overall strength of its intelligentsia, the American government subsidized higher education to an astonishing degree. Humanities majors like my mother reaped the benefit from the initiative as much as scientists-in-training.

Unfortunately, by the time she finished her time in graduate school and began looking for a teaching career, the bottom fell out of English departments in higher education, especially in the City University of New York. Open enrollment meant colleges were made available to everyone, including those who were new immigrants who didn't speak English well, those who had gotten their GEDs and hadn't been in a classroom in years, and those who had been purposefully cursed with dreadful grade school education by the evils of institutional racism. The democratization of college and the end to elitism were noble goals, but those, effectively, led to the watering-down of the literature curriculum at Mom's college and many others. For one thing, the pragmatism of first-generation college students compelled many of them to look to vocational-school-type majors first and discouraged some from even considering majoring in a humanities or liberal arts field. For another, the degree of remediation required to *try* to teach these legions of new students basic writing skills to make up for what they hadn't learned in grade school was considerable. They had so much catching up to do just to be able to survive life in a two-year-professionally-oriented-college. Life in a four-year-liberal-arts-college would be even more challenging to prepare for. How could students with no discernable ability to read or write in English be expected to understand the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne or Herman Melville? Mom only managed to teach "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "Young Goodman Brown" for the first couple of years of her career. Soon after, her courses changed. She taught basic grammar and the four-paragraph essay to remedial writing students at New York City Technical College her whole career. "Being a college teacher is a good job, overall," she told me. "Still, if you can find a way to teach more literature courses than remedial writing, I'd recommend it. If it were up to me, I'd teach a lot more American Romanticism. This whole teaching primarily remedial writing thing I have to do? 'I would prefer not to.'" She would shake her head at students who would describe the sex they had last night in their essays instead of answering the writing prompts; scrunch her eyes at illegible handwriting, awful grammar, and terrible spelling, as well as wonder why she would have to fail the same student four times before they disappeared when school policy demanded they could



only take remedial writing twice before being expelled. Mom had trouble making her way through these papers. To boost her morale, she blasted her Charles Aznavour albums as she graded. Thankfully, I didn't mind the music, or the volume Mom needed to play it at to hear it. While she graded, I stole her blank blue examination books and wrote and drew my own "Little Golden Books," often involving a kaiju attacking New York, or hands coming up from open manhole covers and dragging innocent pedestrians into the sewers.

Since Mom never read for her doctoral-level comprehensive exams and rarely taught great literature, she missed the hardcore literature she had read as a graduate student. She remembered the comprehensives reading list she had never completed. While she had no intention of finishing her doctorate, she hit the classics again, reading seventy-five books in a summer. This feat amazed her brother. At a family reunion the summer following Mom's great classics-reading-list tear, Uncle Carmine took to bragging about Mom's great accomplishment to his Wall Street cousins, Emily Basile-Scrosciare and her husband, Matt Scrosciare.

"You know who the smartest person I ever met is?" Uncle Carmine asked. "My sister! Gianna is so smart. She read eighty books in a summer. Eighty! I can't get over it. My dad read two books in his life: *The Godfather* and the Bible. I've read one book: *The Conscience of a Conservative* by Barry Goldwater. I couldn't read eighty books in a lifetime. I couldn't even read to the end of the list of eighty books she made. I read the first ten books, didn't recognize the titles, and stopped reading. Compare that with my sister!"

Matt cut in, huffily, "Emily and I read a book a week. We're retired and we have the time to do it. Gianna isn't the only brain in the family."

Emily chuckled. "Matt hates that I read the last chapter of a book I'm reading first and then go to the beginning. Sometimes, when I bring a book home from Barnes and Noble, I lay it on the table and go to the bathroom. When I come out, Matt has already stapled the pages of the final chapter together to keep me from reading it first!"

"And I hide the staple remover until I know she's reached the end," Matt grinned.

A judge delivering a verdict, Uncle Carmine proclaimed, "Yeah,

you two aren't as smart as my sister. I bet you four thousand dollars Gianna reads higher quality books."

In fact, Mom read both serious literature and bestsellers. Her reading habits taught me it was easy to blur the line between "homework" and "fun" and "serious literature" and "potboilers." The adaptations for all the above kinds of books eventually found their way to PBS anyway. When Mom was in an Agatha Christie zone, she read at least one novel a week, singing the praises of Miss Marple. I wanted to join her and be a reader, too, but wasn't sure what books would work for me. I wasn't sold on mysteries. "Serious" science fiction seemed to have too many soldiers and androids in it. The earliest books I dared to read were the ones I was assigned in school: *The Secret of NIMH*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Ramona the Brave*. When the teacher asked us to pick out books to read on our own during free period, most of the boys in my class opted for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and the girls gravitated towards *A Wrinkle in Time* or books in *The Baby-Sitters Club* and *Sweet Valley High* sets. Personally, I was most eager to read *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, *Dracula*, and *Frankenstein*, because those were the narratives that I had seen gripping black-and-white adaptations of, thanks to PBS and both parents' taste in all things Gothic. Unfortunately, I had to read watered-down *Classics Illustrated* versions first to lay the groundwork for understanding the *real* novels in high school and college.

It was in the fifth grade that I finally settled into the habit of reading in the overstuffed armchair next to the plush couch my mother laid down on when she read. We would read together for several hours. I enjoyed equally the act of reading and the sense of bonding I felt sharing in my mother's love of books. I had finally settled upon a boxed set to hack my way through: L. Frank Baum's *Oz* novels. I was one of the few who had gone to Radio City Music Hall to see the premiere of the delightfully terrifying 1985 Disney film *Return to Oz*, an infamous box office bomb that triggered the reprinting of the original fourteen books, all of which I bought. Several supplemental *Oz* books by Ruth Plumly Thompson also appeared on bookshelves, but they were \$6 instead of \$3 and not in my price range, so I didn't buy them. I read and enjoyed the first eight of the fourteen Baum books

before I burnt out. It was when I found these books to be far superior to the films inspired by them that I became “a reader.” To my mind, the best scene from *The Wizard of Oz* never made it into the 1939 classic. Dorothy and company encounter the Dainty China Country — a town made of porcelain filled with living porcelain people — built across the yellow brick road. Our heroes couldn’t make their way across the town without accidentally destroying buildings and putting cracks into people. It was a powerful and imaginative segment, well beyond the special effects available to ’30s Hollywood. Reading it, I knew no adaptation would ever match the books for sheer imaginative power, no matter how respected the MGM film with the way-too-old Dorothy was. Even more remarkable, there was no scene in either of the two main Oz films like the one at the end of *The Emerald City of Oz*, when Dorothy discovered Toto could talk, just like every other animal in Oz. *What a revelation! Toto can talk!* No one who stuck to the films knew that! I did. I had secret knowledge lost to the rest of humanity because I was a *reader*. Mom didn’t like the same kinds of books I did, and it sometimes bothered me that I didn’t read hers and she didn’t read mine, but I loved that we shared an appreciation of narrative, and often did our reading together.

Since we were both Italian, emotional, loved literature, and had similar features, I thought of myself as functionally Mom as a boy. However, she was far more logical and pragmatic than I was. In the early years of the Internet, we took two online personality tests that were comically revealing. The first was: “How left-brained and how right-brained are you?” Leo and I both got thirty percent left-brain (organized and systematic) and seventy percent right-brained (creative and intuitive). Mom, in contrast, registered as 94% organized and systematic and 6% creative and intuitive. The second internet personality test was “Which Jane Austen heroine are you?” Mom was Elinor Dashwood. I got Marianne Dashwood. If you don’t know your Jane Austen, all you need to know is these results match the left/right brain results. I also loved science fiction, horror, and fantasy, and Mom loved realistic fiction. Given her urban worldview and indifference to NASA, I sometimes giggled imagining her reciting Gil Scott-Heron’s “Whitey on the Moon.”

During our early years as kids, Mom drove to work every day on the Brooklyn-Queens-Expressway. During the next two decades, the commute grew gradually worse as the traffic grew more congested and the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge toll skyrocketed. In addition to detesting the commute to what she referred to as “glorious downtown Brooklyn,” Mom found the actual teaching work tiresome. As a full-time teacher without a PhD, Mom was expected to teach more classes than professors with PhDs. She was also asked to serve on more committees. She was not expected to publish scholarship or attend academic conferences. Despite her relatively short number of hours in the classroom compared to the number of hours punch-clock employees spent doing nine-to-five jobs with two weeks of vacation per year, she clearly worked like a mule grading and regrading a dozen essay assignments granted to upwards of two-hundred students a semester. Also, after Mom returned home from work, exhausted, she found herself numbed by the prospect of having to cook dinner and do housework every night. Her husband worked nights on the weekdays, so he wasn’t around to help much. Even when he was home on weekends, he had a tendency towards indolence that left most household chores up to her. Essentially, Dad took out the garbage regularly, tended to the rasboras in his fish tank, planned family trips, did most of the driving, and occasionally cooked Chipped Beef on Toast for breakfast or Chicken a la King for dinner. Mom did the rest of the work. She would test his laziness by leaving laundry pointedly undone, a lawn unmowed, or a kitchen sink dripping, waiting to see how long it would take for him to notice. When he wouldn’t address the issue for a week, Mom would ask him, politely, to take care of it. After another week passed, Mom flew into a rage and did it herself, screaming, “Fine! Leave it for the maid! Let the maid do it!” The most memorable of these incidents happened when I was in high school. I woke at three a.m. to the sounds of extreme labor coming from the hallway bathroom outside my bedroom. Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I stumbled up to the bathroom in my striped blue-and-white pajamas and looked inside. Breathing irregularly and sweating profusely, Mom stood on a step ladder using a roller to apply adobe brown paint to the bathroom walls; an open can of paint balanced precariously on the yellow sink.

"Your father took too long." She failed at sounding casual.

"Can't you do this in the morning?" I asked.

Mom kept painting.

I sighed. "This is pretty weird, Mom."

She ignored me. If her mother could keep a small apartment gorgeous and sparkling clean every day, she would do the same for our three-level house, even if it killed her.

"Crom!" I exclaimed. "I'll do it tomorrow."

Mom kept painting.

"By the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth!" I cried, now going to the well with as many super-hero-related spells and curses I could recall. "Nothing I say is gonna stop you, is it?"

Mom dipped the roller into the paint and slapped some more adobe brown on the wall.

Wiping sleep from his eyes, Leo emerged from his room. "Is Mom doing her martyr thing? Performing the Stations of the Cross?" He peered through the bathroom door at Mom, who would keep painting until the job was done. "Yup."

I nodded. "'Mom paints the bathroom of Pontius Pilate.' 'Mom falls the first time.'"

Leo added, "'Mom washes the Temple of Jerusalem's *opus sectile* floor on hands and knees using Pine-Sol.' 'Mom falls the second time.' Yeah, she's not stopping any time soon."

"Sweet Christmas! Let's go back to sleep."