

SUDDEN DEATH – 1932

by

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The aroma of tomato sauce and demitasse coffee lingered in the small New Jersey kitchen. As Isabell finished washing the Sunday dinner dishes, her mother walked in and announced, “Me and Papa are going to New York now. I’m anxious to see Vincenzo. When he goes back to Italy next week I may never see him again.”

“Mama, why can’t you wait a little longer? I really don’t want you to go without us.”

Isabell’s mother left her daughter, saying, “Sabell, sono tutti bene! (Everything is fine!) We’ll meet you at Vincenzo’s house.”

Isabell hugged her mother and helped her into the back seat. She waved as the car pulled away. An empty feeling came over her.

Two hours later Isabell stood on the upper deck of the Weehawken ferryboat as it approached the lower Manhattan dock. Although it was a warm summer day, she felt a sudden chill.

Cars leaving the dock turned onto Canal Street and then into the Jewish neighborhood. Streets were crowded with pushcarts and vendors. Stores closed on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, but opened on Sunday. Leonard drove slowly and carefully. Isabell was impatient. Entering the neighborhood known as Little Italy, they saw Mott Street crowded with stopped cars. Then they saw the reason.

The ambulance's flashing lights made Isabell's heart pound. She was shocked at the sight of her father and her sister Mary standing next to the ambulance.

"Where's Mama?" Isabell shouted. She started to open the car door, but Leonard held her back.

"Don't jump out with the baby in your arms! Let me pull to the curb. I'll hold Joey."

Isabell ran to her sister, shouting over the blaring car horns, "Where's Mama? Where's Mama?"

Mary, with tears streaming down her ashen face, nodded toward the ambulance. Isabell turned to reach out to her mother just as the ambulance pulled away.

"What happened? Where are they taking her? Will she be all right?" Isabell wanted to know.

The sisters collapsed into each others arms, oblivious of the traffic around them. Their husbands hurried them into the cars and followed the ambulance to St. Vincent Hospital. Moments later they raced into the emergency room. While they waited for the doctor, her father paced back and forth. He didn't understand the unfamiliar surroundings and wondered where his wife had been taken.

Mary tried to explain what happened. "One minute Mama was talking, laughing, and drinking coffee. The next minute she slumped to the floor. We put cold compresses on her face, but we could not bring her back. Someone ran outside, found a policeman, and asked him to get an ambulance."

After what seemed like forever, a doctor came out and asked to speak to

Lucia Olivieri's husband. Isabell's father, sitting in stony silence, stared blankly as the doctor spoke English to him. Mary's husband, Joe, interrupted and explained he spoke no English.

As the English-speaking family members gathered around the doctor, no one paid attention to Paolo's leaving. Drawn to the room where Lucia lay in a coma, he gently held her hand in his rough laborer's hands and looked at the woman who had stood by him when he decided to leave Calabria thirty years earlier. Life in the new country had not been easy. The streets weren't paved with gold. Lucia gave him five children and worked hard.

As other family members came into the room, the sisters sobbed uncontrollably. Joe explained to Paolo that Lucia had a massive stroke. She died during the night. She was fifty-three years old.

Isabell remembered her mother's last words to her: "Sabell, sono tutti bene." (Everything's fine.)

But everything wasn't fine. Isabell was twenty-four years old and relied heavily on help from her mother, especially in caring for eighteen-month old Joey.

Shortly before Isabell's ninetieth birthday, I attempted to have a conversation with her about the impact of her mother's death. After many years of our mother-daughter struggle, I realized she had not forgiven her mother for leaving her. She had been looking to me, her daughter, to fill that empty space in her life. But that's another story

