Chapter 1

Untitled

Aurora

August 26 and 27, 1967
Lucca and Florence, Italy

My son smiles at me, revealing the gap where his two front teeth once shone. When I give him a good-luck hug, my arms barely fit around his boxer's torso. He is all sinew and muscle, hard edges and sharp angles.

"Enough hugging," my husband, Stefano, says. "The fight starts in twenty minutes."

Roberto rounds his shoulders, crouches, and throws sharp jabs at an invisible opponent. Stefano sets a quick tempo: "One-two-one-two-one-two."

Sweat drips down Roberto's face. He sucks it in as he bobs on the balls of his feet, back and forth and side to side. He resembles his father with deep-set brown eyes and jet-black hair combed straight back.

I pace the makeshift training room, the storage space of a nearby restaurant. My nose crinkles at the sour scent of Parmesan cheese wheels leaning against the pockmarked stone walls. Stefano has tacked a print of a dewy-eyed Madonna to a wooden beam to protect our son.

I admire a boxer's skill and see every dodge as well-executed choreography. But the bloody fights with the crowd cheering are, to me, spectacles of domination and control. My experiences have shaped that view, and I can't change them.

Still, I'm intrigued by Roberto's preparations. He moves as gracefully as I did when I performed as a dancer before the war. When he began running and jumping, I realized he had the strength and coordination to dance at a high level. But his father wouldn't pay for classes, and I didn't have a single lira.

Stefano hands him a skipping rope. He circles it over his head and under his feet until it becomes a blur, encasing him like a butterfly in a gauzy cocoon. Dust billows as the rope beats against the floor.

Stefano steps toward him, his voice urgent. "Enough. You're Ready. Stay light on your feet. Good footwork will help you control the fight's pace." He moves, showing Roberto what he wants, but stumbles.

Embarrassment flickers across his face, stirring my compassion. He once boxed and might have been a champion. However, he lost his right foot in the war and wears a prosthetic.

My sympathy is short-lived. A familiar resentment bubbles in my stomach, hot and bitter. Stefano took my son from me. When he turned eight, Roberto was at the gym with his father every day after school, leaving little time for me to spend with him—one of many wrongs I never challenged.

Stefano towels the sweat off Roberto's back and ties on red boxing gloves. I drape his frayed red robe over his shoulders.

Crackling static from the outdoor sound system signals that the match is about to begin. I wish the men an enthusiastic "*Buona Fortuna"* and exit through a shaft of afternoon sunlight into Lucca's Piazza dell'Anfiteatro. The July sun glares from a cloudless, pale blue sky. I put on my straw hat and sunglasses.

Beige stuccoed buildings stand three to five storeys high around the elliptical piazza. Merchants display their products on wooden tables. I buy a jar of black olives and admire a display of blue, yellow, and white ceramic bowls. Cafés do brisk business, a customer on every chair, with white umbrellas providing shade.

A musician with a handlebar moustache plays his accordion. In accented English, he sings,

Oh, Carol, I am but a fool,
Don't ever leave me,
Though you treat me cruel.

The music's beat, so different from the flamenco guitar's rhythms to which I once performed, tempts me to move. But my body remains stiff. Even at home, with the shutters closed, I won't let go. I danced for the last time twenty-five years ago.

The boxing ring rises two feet above the ground in the centre of the piazza, with two levels of thick red rope stretching between its white corner poles. Five rows of seats filled with noisy spectators surround the ring. Since the platform is square, why is it called a ring? My reserved seat is in the front row along the ring's south side.

A black skirt and an ill-fitting black blouse—a grieving widow's attire—conceal my curves. Even with this camouflage, men's eyes trespass. I'm forty-three and don't care about appearing attractive. However, my olive skin is clear, and I haven't lost my slender waist. Perhaps the starvation endured during the war forever affected me, not only my body and heart, but also my perspective on others, defining them by how I imagine they might have acted in my circumstances.

The referee, slender with thinning grey hair, stands in the centre of the ring. He wears a crisp, white shirt tucked into black pants and carries a microphone. A sunny smile brightens his pinched face. "Welcome to the championship bout of Lucca's fifth Amateur Light-Heavyweight Boxing Tournament for men between eighteen and twenty-one. The winner will be the 1967 Champion of Tuscany."

As the crowd cheers, Roberto and his opponent enter the piazza from opposite sides of the ring. They strut down the centre aisles, arrive at ringside, and throw punches while waiting for the referee to introduce them.

I wave at my son, who stares in my direction but looks past me. A woman shouts above the cheering, a few rows back, "Hey Roberto, win the fight for me!"

The voice belongs to a tall, lean young woman standing in front of her seat. Tie-dyed swirls of pink, orange, and neon green brighten her T-shirt, while colourful beads

wrap around her neck. She parts her long, black hair in the middle. And has she painted rainbows on her cheeks?

The referee announces, “To my right, wearing blue trunks, at six-foot-three, weighing 220 pounds, twenty years old, from Siena . . . Marco Vicente!” The crowd claps as Marco climbs up the ringside steps, dodges the ropes, and lumbers into the ring.

“And to my left, wearing red trunks, at six-foot-one, weighing 195 pounds, twenty-one years old, from Florence . . . Roberto Marchetti!”

As Roberto ducks between the ropes, his right foot catches the lower one. Instead of making a heroic entrance, he trips and stumbles into the ring. Marco laughs, and the crowd joins him.

I smile. Stumbling into the ring is one of Roberto’s tactics. He uses it to gain an advantage, making his opponents think he’s incompetent.

The referee raises his hands to stop the heckling. “Shake hands and go to your corners.”

The men bump fists and follow his order.

Clang!

I close my eyes. I came to support my son, but I can't watch his opponent pummel him. While the crowd shouts, I envision a flamenco dancer beating her heels into the floor, her skirt swirling as she twirls.

After three minutes, the bell rings. Roberto sits in his corner. I’m relieved not to see a black eye or a bloody face.

Toward the end of Round Three, the spectators gasp, then grow quiet. After the bell, I open my eyes and grimace. Blood drips from a cut above my son’s right eyebrow. I tug on my silver crucifix.

Thirty seconds until Round Four. Above the noise, the woman behind me shouts, “Roberto, knock him down!”

Clang!

Some people in the crowd shout for Marco, while others cheer for my son. I picture the dancer, arms raised overhead, clicking castanets, drowning out the echo of punches crashing against vulnerable cheekbones and fragile noses. A thud. Wild cheers. I open my eyes. Marco lies face down on the mat.

The referee lifts Roberto’s right arm and shouts, “The winner, the new champion, Roberto Marchetti!”

I rush into the training room. Roberto sits with his head tilted back to slow the bleeding.

“Bravo, Roberto!” I pass him a wet rag. “I found some ice at the restaurant.”

“Thank you, Mamma.”

Stefano unties his gloves. “Let’s say a prayer of thanks.”

The three of us stand shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the Madonna.

He says, “Thank you, Holy Mother, for guiding our son to victory.”

I add, “And in the future, please protect his handsome face.”

The men cross themselves.

My husband asks, “Aurora, why don’t you cross yourself?”

“When I see a fighter cross himself, I ask, why would God choose that man to win? What if both fighters do the same? Will the fight end in a draw? Training, preparation, and luck determine the winner.”

Stefano shakes his head; Roberto nods.

Someone knocks on the door.

"I invited a friend," Roberto says and hurries to open it.

The attractive woman who cheered for him enters and playfully punches him on the arm. "Congratulations. You were brilliant."

"Mamma and Papa, I want you to meet my friend, Antonia."

While exchanging hello kisses with her, I stifle a sneeze. Antonia's patchouli perfume overpowers the aging cheese.

"May I ask how you two met?" I ask.

"I'm studying at the Accademia d'Arte in Florence. My figure-drawing class goes to different gyms to sketch athletes. Last week, we went to Roberto's."

"So, you're an artist?" I ask.

"Hopefully, one day." She sets her backpack on the ground.

"I'm going to change," Roberto says. "Antonia, can you show your drawings to my parents?"

She retrieves a sketchbook from her pack and flips through it. Pencil drawings fill the pages, capturing the fighters' bodies lunging, twisting, and reaching.

"I can sense the men's movement in these drawings," I say. "You have talent."

"Thank you." As Antonia bends over to retrieve her bag, a round gold pendant, the size of a 100-lire coin, slips from her T-shirt and mingles with her beads. The piece is engraved with a six-pointed Star of David.

It reminds me of a pendant I saw when I was a girl. I'm about to ask her to turn it so I can see if two familiar words are etched on the back, but she turns away as Roberto enters. He wears his customary grey pants and white shirt.

"Antonia is returning to Florence. I'll walk her to the station and meet you at the restaurant."

After their goodbyes, the young people clasp hands and leave.

"What's the matter with you, Stefano? You didn't compliment her artwork or say goodbye."

He takes down his Madonna print. "Did you see her pendant?"

"I saw a five-pointed star called a pentagram," I lie, my voice sharper than I intend. "Hippies wear them."

He stares at me, his jaw tight. "You're wrong, Aurora. The symbol was a Jewish Star."

. . .

The next morning, I sit between my son and husband in the quiet of Florence's Basilica di Santa Croce, waiting for Mass to begin. Daylight filters through six fifty-foot-high stained-glass windows that rise before me. Fragments of ruby and emerald flicker across the congregation. Behind the lace-covered altar, a gold-framed screen rests, where the Madonna's calm face gazes at the infant in her arms. I have breathed this air every Sunday since I arrived from Trieste with the war's grit still in my lungs. Today marks my 1,250th service.

My watch shows 10:50. The minute hand is moving too slowly. I crack my knuckles and fiddle with my crucifix.

Roberto nudges me. “Are you all right, Mamma?”

Billowing smoke from a silver censer creeps from behind the altar, filling the nave with the spicy scent of frankincense and myrrh. The smoke symbolizes the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven. Today, it only makes my nose run.

I have to get out.

At 11:00, the congregation rises. An emaciated man in a white cassock walks down the aisle, carrying a tall, golden cross. Our portly priest, dressed in red, follows. Alone, facing the tabernacle, he bows, turns to his flock, and kisses the altar. With arms open wide, he says, “The Lord be with you.”

We respond, “And with your spirit.”

He invites the faithful to participate in the Penitential Act. I tremble as I recite the words, “I confess to Almighty God . . . that I have greatly sinned . . . in what I have done and in what I have failed to do.” When the priest looks our way, I wonder if he sees into my soul.

My mind wanders as I plan an early exit. The joyful singing of Gloria brings me back to attention. “Glory to God in the highest. Gloria in excelsis Deo.”

Stefano sings; Roberto mumbles. I join in, relieved to be singing.

A half-hour later, when the priest lifts the Communion wafer and chalice, the congregation lines up to receive the body of Christ on their tongues and his blood in a sip of wine.

I turn to my husband and son. “I drank too much at our victory celebration last night and need fresh air. We’ll meet later.”

Before they respond, I grab my bag and rush up the aisle and out the door. My meeting is in fifteen minutes. After crossing the cathedral’s piazza, I hurry down Borgo Santa Croce to the wall above the Arno River. Rowers speed by on the calm, gold-streaked green water. The boats come from the direction of the Ponte Vecchio on my right. The river reflects the bridge’s three arches and pastel-coloured shops. Nazi bombs destroyed eleven of the Arno’s bridges but spared the Ponte Vecchio—a survivor.

I rush toward the iron gate that guards the stairway to the water’s edge and climb down forty feet to the narrow grass strip bordering the river. A year ago, the Arno flooded. Sludge and debris overwhelmed the city, destroying art, homes, and businesses. Today, it is Florence’s friend once more.

I put down my shoulder bag and sit cross-legged. The rough stone of the embankment presses against my back, a familiar anchor. This is the only place where the noise in my head quiets.

Since he turned ten, I’ve avoided answering Roberto's questions about my past: *Why don’t you dance anymore? How did you survive the war? Why don’t you and Papa hug?* I told myself I would answer when I regained my strength and when he was mature enough to manage the truth.

The woman he knows is a quiet, shy mother who wears a shapeless black outfit. He has never seen the fire.

The only clue is the photograph on our wall. I wear the flamenco skirt that flares like a poppy, the blouse that clings like a second skin. I lunge to the right, my left leg forward, and face the camera. My son looks at that eighteen-year-old and sees a stranger.

Last year, I confided in my wartime friends, Ruth and Paul: “If I speak to Roberto about my family and lover . . . I will shatter.”

Ruth, who creates with words as Paul does with piano keys, offered a solution. She had documented her and Paul's stories. "Write down your memories, Aurora," she said. "Tell the truth, including what frightens, shames, and haunts you. Record each word spoken, all you witnessed, every taste and smell. I will shape them into a story for Roberto. One that will last."

The idea offered the best path forward. I suggested including Ruth and Paul's adventures to help my son grasp the times we experienced and what we shared. "Our stories will inspire him to move boldly through life by showing how 'ordinary' people showed magnificence as the world burned."

After I told Stefano about our project, he shrugged. "Include what you want. I have nothing to hide."

Heels clatter. Ruth and Paul climb down the stone steps. He carries a plain brown package. My heart races.

"Aurora!"

Ruth's eyes are wide with excitement, and a broad smile lights up her face. A few silver strands shimmer in her hair. Paul's grin creases the corners of his green eyes. The ridged, L-shaped scar on his left cheekbone brings back memories.

He presses the package into my hands.

Ruth's voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. "Your son will be intrigued. Are you ready for his questions?"

"I am."

A boat races by. A rower shouts, "*Più veloce, più veloce*—faster, faster."

Paul checks his watch. "We need to get home. I'm sure you want to start reading."

Ruth takes her hand. "Call the moment you finish."

And, as quickly as they came, they're gone, leaving me alone to face the future.

I sit again, legs crossed. I hope the enclosed manuscript will be grand: parchment paper bound in leather, with a title embossed in gold. I tear it open. The inch-thick stack is from a photocopying shop. Its pages, punched with three holes, are joined with silver rings. It doesn't matter.

I hold my son's gift. Its title, "*SPERANZA*"—"*HOPE"*—contains the initials of the three storytellers' first names.

Roberto's twenty-second birthday is in two weeks. I'll confess "what I have done" and "what I have failed to do." Then, I'll hand him his present.

As the manuscript rests in my lap, I feel it vibrating like a creature frozen in ice, thawing and coming to life in the summer sun.

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