

LIBERATION

Mariella's knife landed swiftly, solidly, *thunk, thunk, thunk*, again and again, on the cutting surface. She diced celery, carrots, and onions with precision borne of fury. She was preparing the *soffritto* for tomorrow's ragu.

Mamma sat in her chair across the kitchen, at the wooden table against the wall, thick stucco, like all the walls in the apartment. She'd folded her arms in front of her, a sentry in an apron, standing guard.

Mariella braced for her mother's explosion, like the unpredictable eruptions of Mount Etna, the volcano incessantly rumbling and visible outside the apartment windows. If her mother uttered one more word about the size of the carrots—*You're making them too big!* Or anything about her corkscrew hair falling in her face, Mariella swore, she *would* take this knife to her.

Forgotten, for the moment, as the knife sounded over and over on the board, was not only her excitement, but the terror and the sorrow that had plagued her, kept her from sleeping these past weeks. She'd never been on a plane, let alone planned an escape halfway across the world. An escape to America that would free her from an impending marriage she hadn't asked for and didn't want.

But what other choice? She'd die if she stayed, suffocated on this island. Oh, Matteo was fine, handsome and smart. But their parents were so steeped in the old Sicilian ways, it may as well have been the 18th century, rather than the 21st.

She gathered up the mound of diced vegetables against the back of her knife and lowered them carefully into the olive oil, just this side of smoking, in the ragu pot.

Mamma blurted, “College girl, you think you're so smart? You make me sick!”

Mariella had just cut a bulb from the garlic braid hanging near the stove. She stepped, quickly, knife in hand, and leaned close to her mother.

“Then, why, Mamma, why do you invite—no insist—why do you *insist* I come into the kitchen to help you?” When she realized she was brandishing the knife in the air, she laughed. She slapped it down, hard, along with the garlic, on the wooden table.

Mamma gasped and put her hand to her throat. Her coal black eyes widened and darkened so that Mariella couldn't distinguish the irises from the pupils.

This felt good, this advantage, with her mother sitting down.

Mamma lowered herself toward her chair, missed the edge—deliberately, Mariella thought—and landed, first on her knees, and then, on all fours.

“What's Mamma doing on the floor?” her younger brother Olimpio asked, stopping and stepping inside the kitchen, on his way past.

“Madonna!” Mamma moaned, as if she'd been poisoned. She sat back on her haunches and raised her agonized face to Heaven. Really, to the kitchen ceiling.

Olimpio dampened a cloth at the sink for his mother.

“No!” Mamma cried. “It's her job. Not for you, not for my son!” She sobbed in great gulps, gasping for air. “It's *your* job, she said, pointing at Mariella.

“No, her job is to live her life,” Nonna said, appearing in the kitchen entryway. “You didn't need to call me, you're making so much noise, I heard you all the way in my room.” She wore

old-lady chunky-heeled shoes, laced-up and black, and a print rayon dress. Her gray hair was braided and coiled on top of her head, like a crown.

“Nonna!” Mariella cried. She rushed to her grandmother and threw her arms around her.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Nonna said to her daughter over Mariella’s shoulder.

Mariella's knife hit the board even harder once Olimpio had escorted Mamma, sobbing, from the kitchen. She minced the garlic, nearly mashing it into a pulp. She slid it into the pot and let it brown with the *soffritto* a moment, then built the *ragu* of seared chunks of pork loin and sweet pork sausages, diced tomatoes, sun-dried tomato paste, a bay leaf, oregano, a sprig of rosemary and a good pinch of marjoram. She added water and a generous dollop of red wine, salt, and a sprinkle of red pepper flakes. She then balanced the wooden cooking spoon on the rim of the pot, under a lid, covering the sauce but allowing for moisture to escape. The sauce would simmer for hours. When it was reheated tomorrow, the flavors would be layered and rich. *Sposato*, as chefs liked to say. Something she didn’t want to be: married.