

Everything

We

Thought

Was

True



A NOVEL

LISA MONTANARO

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The story of Frank and Teresa is lovingly dedicated to my parents, Joseph and Carol.

“To be nobody—but yourself—in a world which is doing its best day and night to make you like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.”

~ e.e. cummings



“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

~ e.e. cummings



“For whatever we lose (like a you or a me), it's always our self we find in the sea.”

~ e.e. cummings



OVERTURE





LENA – NEW ROCHELLE, NY

1983



When my family sat down for dinner, the last thing I expected was my typically unruffled Italian American mom to hurl a plate of spaghetti and peas against the wall. Even worse—she was aiming for my father.

To officially kick off summer and celebrate the end of school, Mom had made one of our favorite dishes, *pasta e piselli*—spaghetti with peas in red gravy. She spent hours making it from scratch, holed up in the cramped kitchen, which grew hot as an inferno on this sticky summer night. Every time my older brother, Anthony, still whining at fifteen, asked when dinner was, she'd say, "When your goddamn father gets home," and then under her breath, "Whenever that will be."

My father's absence from the dinner table had become the norm lately—he was often out late after work—yet my mother still held out hope for his arrival that night. He graced us with his presence a half hour later, waltzing in and washing up, while my mom motioned for us to sit down at the dining room table of the duplex my family rented in a New York City suburb. Mom served my father's spaghetti and peas with more force than necessary, hitting the serving spoon against the side of the bowl with a clank that made me jump in my seat.

Dad spread his napkin on his lap as though nothing was amiss. "Sorry I'm late. I had to swing by the boatyard after work and check on something."

Mom raised her eyebrows and didn't make eye contact with him. "I don't remember you telling me you had to stop by the boatyard. Are you sure that's where you were?"

"Of course. I told you. Where else would I be?"

Mom put down the serving spoon and looked up at him. "Well, I don't know, Frank. I hardly ever know where you are these days, do I?"

I looked from my mother to my father, trying to make sense of what was happening. Anthony was oblivious, heartily eating, already on his second helping. I'd heard my parents fight many times, but this time felt different. Mom's jaw was set, and steely resolve shone in her eyes. Electricity buzzed around the table, so strong I could almost hear it. My parents' roles were reversed, with my mother appearing to have the upper hand and my father looking like a petulant teenager who'd been caught coming home past curfew.

I had a sinking feeling her change in attitude had something to do with what I'd said to her about Dad a few nights before at McDonald's. I'd told her that I knew his secret, though I hadn't understood the full weight of it. One Saturday afternoon four summers earlier, on my dad's boat, I'd caught my dad and his friend Henry in the midst of an intimate moment. Henry's hand was on my father's arm, and my father had his head bent toward his friend, a satisfied smile on his face, a look of tenderness on Henry's. My mother looked at my father that way, but I'd never seen someone else with that exact look on their face directed at my father. Burned into my brain was the image of my father and this man huddled close together in the captain's seat of the boat, a tableau framed by the bright-blue sky and sea. And I'd come to a conclusion: my dad and Henry were more than friends.

"I said I was at the boatyard. That's it."

"That's it? No, Frank, I don't think that's it. There's a lot more going on than *that's it*, and you know it. And so do I."

"Oh, come on, Teresa. Stop with the theatrics."

She snatched her plate of spaghetti and peas and hurled it in my father's direction. He ducked just in time. The plate flew past him and crashed

against the dining room wall. Shards of china skidded across the gold linoleum floor. Red streaks dripped down the wall onto the sideboard that held the stereo system with an eight-track tape of Barry Manilow sticking out. My father stood up, wide-eyed, his hands tightly grasping the sides of the table. His face and knuckles turned white, like they'd been drained of color.

Mom's face was red, and her voice was quivering. "These are your theatrics, Frank! You created them."

I held my breath. *What is she going to do? And, oh my God, what is she going to say? Will she tell him what I know?* I realized my family was precarious, teetering on a cliff, about to fall over.

"No, Frank, I'm not hysterical or a drama queen or whatever else you've accused me of in the past to avoid the real subject—the one we never talk about but is always there. You think it's hidden. Well, it's not." She glanced over at me then back at my father. It seemed once the words poured out, Mom couldn't dam the rest. "Your own daughter knows what's going on—a thirteen-year-old! So don't tell me to stop with the theatrics. If anyone needs to stop with the theatrics, it's you."

She told him. I couldn't believe this was happening.

Dad looked over at me questioningly. I couldn't meet his eyes. I turned away and looked at Anthony, who by this time had stopped eating and was watching the scene unfold with wide-open eyes, holding his forgotten fork in midair. The two of us were like a Greek chorus—there to witness the tragedy and comment on it but not control it. And I knew the truth. Anthony was clueless. I envied him at that moment. I didn't want to be in the know.

"Teresa, I don't know what you're talking about, but this is not the time. That's enough." Dad looked around wildly, like he was trying to find an escape route. But he stayed glued to his spot. His face registered an expression unfamiliar to me, and I realized with horror that it was fear.

The same refrain repeated over and over in my head like a needle stuck on a scratch on one of my worn-out records. *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.*

“Yes, I agree. It’s enough! I’m tired of you going out and doing what you want while I cover for you.” She glanced at me again. “While we all cover for you. We’ve been dancing around this secret long enough, Frank. I’m not having any more of it. I’m done.”

Mom shot to her feet and this time threw the entire serving bowl across the table. It shattered against the wall. The sound was deafening, like something had cracked that could never be repaired. The spaghetti trailed down like an army of caterpillars, inching slowly toward the floor and mixing with the red gravy. The wall looked as if millions of tiny bugs had been squashed all over it, leaving their blood behind like evidence of a crime. The crime, in this case, was the unraveling of my parents’ marriage and the breaking apart of our family.

“Mom!” I pleaded.

She stared at my father, her eyes boring into him, her glare seething. “Get out of this house.”

Anthony jumped to his feet, scraping his chair against the floor. “Mom, no. What do you mean, get out?”

“I mean, I want your father to leave. Right now.”

My father flinched but remained immobile. “Teresa, calm down. No one is going anywhere.”

“Oh yeah?” She said it like it was a dare. “Well, if you won’t leave, I will.”

Stunned silence. I looked at Anthony, who was frozen in place.

Mom swiftly moved into the kitchen and grabbed her purse and keys from the counter. I bolted up from the table, following her, crying, “Mom, no! Don’t go!”

A moment of affection flashed across my mother’s face as she glanced back at me and then Anthony. She gave my shoulder a quick squeeze and then marched forward, a determined look on her face. She went through the back door and stepped outside. The screen door slammed shut behind her, like the period at the end of a long sentence. I heard her big yellow Cadillac back out of the driveway with a mechanical whine and then growl away.



ACT 1: A SECRET IS LURKING





Chapter One

LENA - LOS ANGELES, CA

June 2015

THIRTY-TWO YEARS LATER



I hit Ignore on my cell phone, sending my dad’s call to voicemail and feeling guilty. We often chatted in the morning before work. I would ring him later, but at the moment, I needed to focus. I’d come to the office early so I could be totally prepared to practice my opening statement with Marcus by the time he arrived.

As if on cue, Marcus appeared in my office doorway, trench coat still on, a briefcase in one hand and a cardboard coffee holder with two cups in the other. “You ready, kid?”

It cracked me up that Marcus referred to me as “kid.” He was only twelve years my senior but still used that affectionate term often. It didn’t rankle me. I secretly enjoyed it.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Be right there. Just printing out a clean copy.”

“Of course you are.” He snickered. “Wouldn’t want a dirty, marked-up opening statement. So messy.” He shuddered, making fun of me.

He glanced around my office, which was a study in minimalism with no visible clutter. My desk held only the multitiered inbox system I used for active cases, meticulously color coded and labeled. My credenza contained the few law books I consulted, organized alphabetically by title. It was a stark contrast to the other attorneys’ offices, with their papers, books, and files

haphazardly strewn all over surfaces, along with the occasional used coffee mug with contents that looked like a leftover science experiment. Although the chief liked to chide me about my anal behavior, I credited it as one reason I'd moved up in the division so quickly. I was Ms. Organized before anyone had even heard of Marie Kondo, thank you very much.

"See you in five in the conference room. Oh, and I brought you one of those lattes you love." Marcus raised the cardboard coffee holder as proof.

Shit. The chief drank his coffee black. Nothing fancier than that. He only brought me a latte when he wanted to butter me up or cheer me up. *Which one is it?*

"I've got to talk to you about another case," he added. "Bring that planner of yours."

"Okay," I said, sounding noncommittal even to my own ears.

I was already mentally scanning my docket to see if I could squeeze in another case. I had two upcoming trials, settlement negotiations for two other cases, and a handful of depositions. But my biggest commitment, by far, was the behemoth Hawke Health Care case that could make or break my career. The case scared the shit out of me. Marcus had made me first chair, and I needed to nail it. I was thrilled that a significant case like this had landed in my lap. We were taking on the Southern California health care system for its unfair treatment of female physicians. I'd been waiting years for a case like this to come along—one that could be a game changer and make a big statement about gender discrimination.

I stood up and smoothed down my skirt. I wanted to strike the right note to practice my opening statement and get myself in court mode—confident, approachable, and intelligent. I was wearing my favorite suit, a gorgeous cobalt blue from Nordstrom Rack. Power blue, the saleswoman had called it. Not navy blue—that was so New York financial district. This was Los Angeles—lighter and brighter, less serious but still formidable. It was the suit I'd worn when I won the Randall case the previous year. I also wore three-inch leather heels, a splurge from a recent trip to Florence with my husband,

Kevin. Though five feet, nine inches tall—thanks to my mother—I stood at six feet with the heels on, the same height as Marcus.

May as well be eye to eye with the chief while going toe to toe over my opening statement. I knew he'd be putting me through the paces. He always did.

When I walked into the conference room a few minutes later, Marcus was already seated, papers laid out, coffees on the table. The flip chart was on the easel, ready for us to jot down notes as we stopped along the way. A podium was waiting for me across the room. The chief was ready to go.

Many of my law school friends complained incessantly about their supervisors. I felt like the universe had given me something special when I'd been assigned to work with Marcus. He was my boss, my mentor, and a legend. He'd seen everything and then some. He was about as close as a lawyer could get to being a superhero, in my book. He made me believe in the concept of a true counselor at law—he was dedicated, humble, and a tremendous supporter of his team. Born and bred in downtown LA, he'd gone east to attend the first historically black university law school in the United States—Howard University—then boomeranged back to the West Coast to clerk for the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and then entered the US Attorney's Office. He worked his way up the ranks until he took his seat at the top, in the 1980s, as the first African American Civil Rights Division chief.

When I attended NYU School of Law in the '90s, I read some cases Marcus had argued in federal court and developed a bit of a professional crush on him. I worked my ass off in law school and was rewarded with an offer for my dream job after graduation. The only catch was that it was across the country in California, far from my mother. It was so hard leaving her.

“Lena, before we begin, I wanted to ask if you could handle that sexual orientation case that just came in, for the town of Fletcher school district. Can I add it to your cases?”

I froze. I'd heard about the case and knew it was coming down the pipeline. They'd fired a gay teacher from his public school position in a Central Valley agricultural town, and he was claiming sexual orientation discrimination. It had the potential to explode with media coverage. Typically, I liked to act as first or second chair in high-profile cases for the division. But I didn't have time for this one. Not at the moment.

"I heard about that case. Good one for the division. But I'm slammed with first chairing the Hawke case and overseeing my other cases." *Is that true?* I'd managed heavier caseloads in the past.

I ran through the short list of attorneys at the division I thought could do justice to this case and, grudgingly, came up with only one—Bradley Hanford III, the other deputy in the division besides me. Brad was a good litigator, even if he was a pompous ass. It drove him crazy when he didn't get to sit at the attorney's table with Marcus because I was taking up the second-chair seat. And I had to admit to a certain amount of satisfaction at Brad's irritation.

"Can you give it to Brad?" The words came out of my mouth and made me cringe inside. I couldn't believe I was giving this case away. *Am I really feeling that overwhelmed with my work, or is something else going on?* I couldn't put my finger on it. I just knew in my gut that I didn't want to say yes to this case.

"You sure you don't want this one? You're perfect for it. I'm surprised you're not jumping at it. Heavy dockets never stopped you before."

"I know. But I want to nail this Hawke case and really focus my attention on it." I hesitated. "I think Brad can handle the Fletcher one. And you know he'll jump at the chance." I rolled my eyes.

"Oh, he'll jump at it—that's for sure." Marcus snickered. "But I really think the Fletcher case should be yours. Besides, I think we'll be in good shape for the Hawke case. What gives?"

Damn, he's not letting this go. "I just think I should focus on the cases I already have. The Hawke case is consuming me more than I thought it