

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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#1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIGEON TONY'S
LAST STAND

The background of the cover is a photograph of a cityscape, likely New York City, during the "blue hour" or dawn. The sky is a mix of soft blues and greys, with a few birds in flight on the left side. The city buildings are silhouetted against the light sky, with some windows glowing. The overall mood is atmospheric and cinematic.

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For Francesca, with love

Chapter One

2004

It was June in South Philly, and the humidity was scented with cheesesteaks. The city was famous for its sandwich, but the only acceptable contents were beef, provolone, and fried onions, according to Matty DiNunzio and The Tonys, which sounded like an a cappella group but was more like a barbershop quartet in which nobody could sing.

The Tonys were Pigeon Tony Lucia, Tony “Two Feet” Pensiera, and Tony “From-Down-The-Block” LoMonaco, plus Mariano “Matty” DiNunzio, and they were in their eighties, been friends from when they still had hair. Pigeon Tony was the shortest, bird thin with a nose like a beak and dark eyes still sharp enough not to need glasses. The other men were soft, round, and wrinkled, with more spots than most constellations. Tony From-Down-The-Block always had a Band-Aid at the bridge of his broken glasses, which he replaced from time to time, as if the frames would heal.

The men dressed alike, and each had on a white undershirt with polyblend bermuda shorts in navy or plaid. They all wore pleather sandals with white socks, except for Tony Two Feet, who had black orthopedic shoes, which wasn’t why he was nicknamed Feet. Completing their ensemble were gold crucifixes and Saint Christopher’s medals, the patron saint of travelers, though none of them went north of Washington Avenue.

The four men were eating their cheesesteaks at a card table, their napkins tucked into their collars. They usually spent the day up on the rooftop, talking and playing pinochle while Pigeon Tony tended the homing pigeons in his loft, which was a square of wire and plywood painted as white as a Communion wafer. He kept ten pigeons in five couples, and the birds were a Belgian breed known as Meulemans, among the fastest in his combine. Matty and The Tonys bet on his pigeons for cheesesteak money. There was more than one way to fund a retirement.

But today the men finished lunch in worried silence. Pigeon Tony’s favorite pigeon, Verdi, hadn’t come home yet. It was Monday, and the first training race of the season had been on Saturday morning, with the birds released in Gettysburg. Pigeon Tony’s other birds had come home on time, and he might have won even without Verdi. But he didn’t race for

sport or money.

Pigeon Tony rose and searched the sky for Verdi, but there was no sign of him. Phone, cable, and electrical wires hung like a net over the city, and Pigeon Tony prayed that Verdi hadn't gotten hurt on one. Pigeon Tony loved Verdi, and so did the bird's wife, Signora Verdi. Pigeons mated for life, and the traditional method of pigeon racing was to release the male a distance away so that he would fly to his hen. Scientists didn't know how pigeons found their way home, but Pigeon Tony did. It was love.

"He come 'ome soon," Pigeon Tony said to himself. His English was still broken, but the other men didn't mind. They thought it was an improvement because it got to the point.

"HE'S GOTTA," Matty shouted, since he never wore his hearing aids. Nobody minded that, either, because they could hear him better.

Feet came over, too. "He's just late, for the first time. There's a first time for everything. That's why they say you always remember your first time."

Tony From-Down-The-Block snorted. "That's not why. They're talking about sex, and I bet you forgot your first time."

"Hell, I forgot the *last*," Feet shot back, and they laughed.

Meanwhile Pigeon Tony slid his binoculars from their plastic bag and held them to his eyes. Still, no Verdi. The rooftops around him were flat black rectangles, and only one or two had decks like his, which had been installed by the men. They'd run cable and electric from his apartment for a dorm-size refrigerator and a small TV, playing ESPN on mute.

Pigeon Tony looked through the binoculars and spotted children walking home from middle school, about ten blocks away. Among them was Evo Novak, who helped Pigeon Tony in the loft after school and lived with his aunt on the second floor of the same row house.

"I see Evo." Pigeon Tony brightened, feeling a rush of love for the boy.

"I WONDER HOW HE DID ON HIS MATH TEST."

Feet added, "He needed an 87."

Tony From-Down-The-Block nodded. "Ten bucks says he got it."

"DON'T BET ON THE KID. HE'S NOT A PIGEON."

"So? I didn't bet *against* him."

"STILL."

Pigeon Tony watched through the binoculars as Evo passed two drug dealers who hung on a street corner. Suddenly the drug dealers grabbed Evo, and Pigeon Tony felt a bolt of alarm. “No, Evo!”

“WHATSA MATTER?”

Feet frowned. “Is Evo okay?”

Pigeon Tony kept watching through the binoculars. “Men onna corner talk to ’im!”

“WHAT MEN? THE DRUG DEALERS? OH NO!”

Feet gasped. “He don’t do drugs. He’s only ten!”

Tony From-Down-The-Block simmered. “If they bother that kid . . .”

Pigeon Tony watched as Evo finished talking to the drug dealers, then hurried away from them down the street. “Alla okay, ’e come now.”

“I DON’T WANT THOSE DRUG DEALERS ANYWHERE NEAR HIM.”

Tony From-Down-The-Block scowled. “We have to do something.”

“LIKE WHAT?” Matty’s milky brown eyes widened behind his bifocals. “WE GOTTA THINK FAST.”

Pigeon Tony lowered the binoculars. “*Andiamo!*”

Chapter Two

Time stopped in Pigeon Tony's kitchen, and a white Formica table with gold flecks sat against the wall under a curling photo of Pope John, a 1972 parish calendar, and an autographed photo of Frank Sinatra at the Latin Casino in Cherry Hill, which was neither Latin nor a casino, now defunct. White cabinets and ancient appliances lined the opposite wall, and a strand of desiccated Easter palm was tucked behind the light switch with some Mass cards, more every year. Time was an old man's frenemy.

"Here, Evo." Pigeon Tony served the boy the other half of his cheesesteak, a glass of store-brand cola, and a napkin, then sat down next to Feet and Tony From-Down-The-Block. Matty stood at the stove making espresso in an Italian moka pot, which guaranteed bitter authenticity. The men drank only percolated coffee and refused to use electric coffee makers. They were like the Amish, only with better food.

"Thanks." Evo tucked his napkin into his collar, the way they'd taught him. A handsome boy, he had round blue-gray eyes, a straight nose, and high cheekbones. His hair was a sandy brown and his mouth unusually pursed today. He picked up his cheesesteak, pausing. "Verdi's still not back?"

"No, 'ow you know?"

"You would've said if he was." Evo frowned. "You don't think anything bad happened to him, do you?"

"No. He come soon. Eat."

Evo flicked his hair back and took a bite of his cheesesteak. Ketchup oozed from the side, dropping onto the paper plate. "Hey, guess what, I got an A-minus on my *Number the Stars* test."

"*Bravo.*"

Tony From-Down-The-Block interjected, "What about the math? Did you break 87?"

"Totally." Evo smiled, chewing. "I got a 94."

"Ha!" Tony From-Down-The-Block clapped. "I *knew* we shoulda bet!"

Matty shot him a look. The moka pot began to bubble, releasing the aroma of distilled caffeine.

Pigeon Tony didn't speak enough English for small talk. "Evo, I see

men onna corner talk to you. What 'appen?"

Evo blinked, taken aback. "How did you see me? Were you there?"

"WITH THE BINOCULARS." Matty turned off the gas. "DID THEY TRY AN' SELL YOU DRUGS?"

"Me?" Evo's eyes flared. "No, no! I would never buy drugs. I don't do drugs. You guys know that—"

"WHAT DID THEY WANT?"

"They didn't want anything."

"EVO, YOU CAN TELL US." Matty came over, forgetting about the espresso.

"He asked my name." Evo set his cheesesteak down. "Don't tell my aunt. She'll just get upset. Please."

Feet leaned over. "Evo, what did he say? Why did he ask your name?"

Evo sighed. "He wants me to help them."

Pigeon Tony gasped. "No! 'Ow? 'Ow you 'elp him?"

"He would pay me to take money back and forth to their house, on my bike. He said I would be like a messenger."

"*Bastardo!*" Pigeon Tony said, which required no translation. They had bought Evo the bike last Christmas.

"WHERE'S THE HOUSE?"

"I don't know." Evo gulped some soda. "He asked me the other day too. I walked home a different way, but he found me. He said it's not illegal to be a messenger."

"HE'S LYING. DO YOU KNOW THEIR NAMES?"

"Only the tall one I talked to. They call him Flex." Evo swallowed hard. "He told me I have to do it or they'll beat me up."

Pigeon Tony slammed a bony fist on the table. "We no let them!"

Feet's mouth dropped open. "No way!"

Tony From-Down-The-Block clenched his teeth. "Evo, we'll walk you home from school every day. We'll walk you there too."

"No, please." Evo recoiled, his young eyes flaring. "You can't. It will make everything worse."

Pigeon Tony understood. Evo was shy, having been in the country only three years. His English was excellent, but his Croatian accent got him bullied at school. He had few friends and didn't play sports, his frame slight in his striped T-shirt. His father had died in the Serbo-Croatian War, and his mother had passed of breast cancer. His only family was his aunt,

Sofia Ravić, a home care nurse who worked two jobs to make ends meet.

Feet leaned over. “Evo, do other kids help them?”

“I don’t know, I never saw them talk to the other kids. They picked me—I don’t know why.”

Pigeon Tony went to Evo, putting a hand on his knobby shoulder. “No worry, Evo. We ’elp you.”

Evo looked up, anxious. “How? There’s nothing you can do.”

“Alla okay. Evo, you eat. Eat.”

“YEAH, YOU GOTTA BE HUNGRY.”

Feet nodded. “Yes. Eat.”

Evo picked up his cheesesteak and took a bite.

“We got coffee?” Tony From-Down-The-Block asked, looking around.

“I’LL MAKE FRESH.”

After Evo had gone downstairs, the men sat around the kitchen table, fueled by fear, love, and caffeine. Pigeon Tony shook his fist. “I go onna corner. I *beat* ’im. I stop ’im.”

Matty shook his head. “NO, WE GOTTA DEAL WITH THIS THE RIGHT WAY. MY MARY’S A LAWYER. SHE’LL TELL US WHAT TO DO. I’LL CALL HER.”

Feet clucked. “I say we go straight to the cops. Tell ’em what happened. File a charge or whatever.”

Tony From-Down-The-Block nodded. “I’m with Feet. The cops gotta do something.”

Pigeon Tony scowled. “No police.”

Feet looked over. “You’re not in It’ly anymore, Pigeon. You gotta get with the times. These are dangerous men.”

Pigeon Tony wagged a gnarled finger. “We *beat* them!”

Tony From-Down-The-Block snorted. “At our age? We can’t beat up nobody.”

Feet looked over. “Speak for yourself. I’m in good shape. I go to SilverSneakers. I take Fall Prevention.”

“Bottom line, we’re too old. Matty can’t hear, you can’t see, and I got a prostate the size of Jersey.”

Pigeon Tony let them argue, but he knew what they had to do next.

Chapter Three

The second-floor kitchen was the same layout as Pigeon Tony's but had a Mr. Coffee machine, a microwave, and an air conditioner. Its walls were painted a bright blue and covered with signs like **BLESS THIS MESS, IN THIS KITCHEN WE DANCE**, and **I LOVE YOU TO THE FRIDGE AND BACK**. Evo's aunt Sofia said they cheered her up, but they weren't working tonight.

Pigeon Tony and Matty sat at the table with Sofia, telling her what the drug dealer had said to Evo. Evo was in his bedroom doing homework, and Feet and Tony From-Down-The-Block had gone home. Matty's English was better than Pigeon Tony's, so he did most of the talking, or the shouting.

"EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE ALL RIGHT, SOFIA."

"My God." Sofia rubbed her face, leaving pinkish streaks on her fair skin. She was a pretty woman in her forties, but her blue eyes were washed out, and her blonde hair slipped from its ponytail. She had on turquoise scrubs decorated with smiling cats, having just gotten home from her second job.

"SO WHAT DO YOU WANNA DO, SOFIA? MY MARY OR THE COPS? WHATEVER YOU WANT, WE'RE BEHIND YOU."

"Thanks." Sofia sighed. "Well, I don't want to go to the cops."

"*Brava*." Pigeon Tony smiled.

Matty frowned. "WHY NOT, SOFIA? THE DRUG DEALER THREATENED HIM. THAT'S GOTTA BE ILLEGAL."

"I don't want him to get into worse trouble. What if they retaliate?" Tears filmed Sofia's eyes. "And the cops might tell Immigration. We're legally here, but I don't want to take any chances."

Pigeon Tony understood. She didn't want to draw attention to herself. He didn't, either, even though he had *documenti*. They lived here because America said it was okay. What if America changed its mind? It could happen.

"THEN HOW ABOUT WE GO SEE MARY? SHE'S A LAWYER IN CENTER CITY."

"I can't afford that, Matty."

Matty smiled. "YOU DON'T GOTTA PAY. YOUR MONEY'S NO GOOD WITH US."

“No worry,” Pigeon Tony repeated.

“WE’LL GO TOMORROW.”

“Well, thank you, Matty.” Sofia smiled warmly. “But I can’t go tomorrow. I have double shifts the whole week.”

“NO PROBLEM. WE’LL GO FOR YOU. WE’LL FILL YOU IN.”

“But he’s my nephew, it’s my responsibility.” Sofia brushed a strand of hair from a forehead creased with worry. “And what about school? I don’t want to send him tomorrow. It’s not safe.”

“DON’T SEND HIM TILL WE GET THIS FIGGERED OUT. TONY FROM-DOWN-THE-BLOCK CAN SIT WITH HIM AT PIGEON TONY’S.”

“Thank you, but . . . ,” Sofia started to say. “My sister and her husband were such good parents, I feel like I’m letting them down.”

Matty patted her hand. “NO, SOFIA, YOU DO PLENTY. THEY KNOW, THEY’RE WATCHIN’ FROM HEAVEN.”

“*Si, si.*” Pigeon Tony had family in heaven too. His wife Silvana, his son Frank, and his daughter-in-law Gemma. Lately he’d been wondering why God hadn’t called him home. Now he knew.

Evo needed him.

Chapter Four

That night, Pigeon Tony went to the rooftop to check for Verdi, but the bird still wasn't home. He went inside his loft and turned on the light. The pigeons woke up, blinking their sharp red eyes, roosted two by two in their boxes. Only Signora was alone.

Pigeon Tony went to her box and stroked her smooth gray feathers. She fluffed her wings, resettling, and whitish down flew around like dandelion seeds. He checked her little plastic bin of seed and corn, but she still hadn't eaten, which worried him. He stroked her again, then left the loft.

He went to the side of the roof, took his binoculars from the plastic bag, and held them to his eyes, searching again for Verdi. The sky was an orangey black from the city lights, and the wires faded into the dark haze. He whistled, but still no luck.

He trained the binoculars on the corner with the drug dealers, but he couldn't see Flex, only shadowy figures. Cars would pull up at the corner, a drug dealer would lean in, then the cars would take off, one car after another. Sometimes the drug dealers would group together, smoking and talking.

Pigeon Tony watched them for a while, and his thoughts traveled back in time, to when he was young and the Blackshirts had come to his town. He could see them now, in his mind's eye. They would stand outside their headquarters at night, smoking and talking, and in time, they became the police. If anyone spoke out against them, they would arrest and beat him. They paid rewards to neighbors who turned in other neighbors. The town turned quiet and fearful.

One night, Tony rode to borrow some hay and had to pass the Fascists. They started calling him names, but he didn't reply, trotting past them. Suddenly a Blackshirt drew a pistol and shot in the air. The pony bolted with fear, throwing Tony to the dirt.

"Bastardo!" Tony rose, furious.

Immediately the Blackshirts set upon him, punching him. He fought back but had no chance against so many, and they pushed him down, kicking him again and again. He endured their blows until they grew tired of beating him, then they went inside the house.

Somehow Tony made it home, but he learned that such men would not

stop unless someone stopped them. His own countrymen had to be stopped by the Americans, and when the war was over, he went to America because she fought for what was right, which was called justice. He had even gotten justice himself not long ago, when he'd had to stop such a man.

Pigeon Tony lowered the binoculars, his thoughts returning to the present. The drug dealers weren't Blackshirts, but such men were the same in all times and all places. They wouldn't be stopped unless he stopped them.

Suddenly his chest tightened. His heart fluttered like one of his pigeons flapping its wings. He looked around for a chair, hustled over, and sat down, trying to catch his breath. He almost dropped the binoculars.

He heard the sound of the door opening and looked over to see his grandson Frank.

“Pop?” Frank saw him, rushing over. “Pop!”

“Frankie—” Pigeon Tony started to say, but Frank took one look at him and lifted him from the chair.

Racing to the door with him.

Chapter Five

No worry, Frankie. Turn around. We go home.” Pigeon Tony sat in the passenger seat while his grandson, Frank, careened through South Philly in his pickup. He was already feeling better, except that he was embarrassed about being carried like a baby from the house. Sofia and Evo had seen from their window and had come running outside. So had Teresa from the hoagie shop on the first floor.

“Is your chest tight, Pop? Does it hurt?”

“No, no. We go home.”

“No, we’re going to the emergency room. The cardiologist said if you have another episode, go to the hospital.”

“No, Frankie, *alla good*, turn around.” Pigeon Tony waved him off. A dusty laptop and papers sat on the console, and wires were everywhere. His grandson had his own masonry business, Lucia Construction. Stones rolled around the truck bed when Frank turned the corner.

“We’ll be there in five minutes. Does your left arm hurt?”

“No, no. *Alla good*.”

“How about your left shoulder?”

“Turn around, Frankie,” Pigeon Tony repeated, but Frank ignored him, stubborn like his father, with big brown eyes and thick wavy hair. He was tall and good looking, with a gentle, strong heart, like all Abruzzese.

“Are you taking your pills?”

“*Si, si*.” Pigeon Tony took four pills a day. He put them in ketchup so they were easy to swallow. Ketchup was like tomato sauce for Americans. They put it on everything.

“And no salt? You stopped with the salt?”

“*Si, si*.” Pigeon Tony used less salt. A little less.

“And no more cheesesteaks?”

Pigeon Tony pretended not to hear, looking out the window. Frank was driving fast, making the row houses a blur. Everyone was home watching television, which looked like lightning inside.

“Pop? No more steaks, right? The doctor said it’s too much saturated fat. Remember what she said?”

Pigeon Tony kept looking out the window, and there were shops on every corner. They were in the nicer blocks, where there were no drug dealers. South Philly used to be Italian, Jewish, and African American, but

Vietnamese, Korean, and Indian families had moved in. Pigeon Tony welcomed everybody, since he understood why people wanted to come to America, land of justice and ketchup.

“Pop? You stopped with the steaks, right?”

Pigeon Tony didn't reply.

“Pop, you gotta cut out the steaks. The doctor said you could have salad or a tuna hoagie.”

“No like salad.”

“What about tuna fish?”

“No like tuna fish.” Pigeon Tony turned up his nose. He liked sardine sandwiches, but nobody made them here, which was the only thing he didn't like about America.

Frank shook his head. “I know why this happened. You're stressed about Evo. I heard.”

Pigeon Tony looked over. “Ow you 'ear?”

“Matty called his wife, and she called Mary. You can't deal with this, I can. I'm gonna call some guys I know.”

“Sofia no want.” Pigeon Tony didn't want Frank to fight either. It wasn't his battle.

“Then what are we gonna do? We gotta protect the kid.”

“No you, me. We go see Mary.”

Frank gritted his teeth. “Lawyers can't do anything about scum like that, and you're supposed to avoid stress.”

“Alla good now. Go home.”

“No. We're almost there.”

Pigeon Tony spotted the hospital ahead, a big box of lit windows with a red sign, **EMERGENCY**. It was one of the few big English words he knew, like CinemaScope. “Alla good, Frankie. See me? Alla good.”

Frank looked over. “See what? What are you showing me?”

Pigeon Tony breathed in and out. “Alla good. We go home.”

“No, we go here.” Frankie pulled into the parking lot, jumped out of the truck, and hurried to the passenger side, opening the door. “Come on.”

“No.” Pigeon Tony folded his arms.

“You want me to carry you?”

“No.”

“Then you're gonna walk?”

“No like 'ospital.”

“You don’t like anything!”

“*Non é vero!*”

“Yes, it’s true. What do you like?”

“*Sardine.*”

Frank blinked. “If I get you a sardine sandwich, will you go to the hospital?”

Pigeon Tony gave in. “*Si, si.*”

“But no oil.”

“No!” Pigeon Tony objected, but it was too late.

Chapter Six

The next morning, Pigeon Tony found himself at Mary DiNunzio's law firm, Rosato & Associates. He sat in the leather chair, but it was too deep. His chest barely reached the conference table, and his feet dangled over the rug. He was dressed up in the clothes he wore to Mass because they were in Center City, where the buildings were so tall they didn't leave enough sky for birds. Meanwhile Verdi still hadn't come home, and that wasn't even the worst thing that had happened this morning.

Sunshine flooded through the biggest window Pigeon Tony had ever seen, taking up the whole wall, and the table, chairs, and pictures were big, too. The air smelled like coffee, since Mary had made a pot and served it to them in white foam cups. There was a cardboard box of fresh *sfogliatelle* on the table, since no Italian visited anyone empty handed, even lawyers.

"Pigeon Tony, how are you?" Mary DiNunzio smiled, at the head of the table. She looked like when she was little, with a pretty face, nice brown eyes, and shiny hair pulled back. He had gone to her First Holy Communion, and she had grown up to be a lawyer in a dark-blue suit. Pigeon Tony was so proud of her he could cry.

"Alla good."

"Judy's sorry she couldn't be here. She's out of town this week."

"Is okay." Pigeon Tony loved Judy, too. She had helped him on a case and fallen in love with his grandson, Frankie. Pigeon Tony was hoping for great-grandchildren, who would be half-Italian and half-lawyer.

"Pigeon Tony, I heard you went to the ER last night. Are you having a heart problem?"

Pigeon Tony waved her off.

"WHAT'S THAT PLASTIC THING STICKIN' OUTA YOUR SHIRT? YOU WEARIN' A WIRE?"

Pigeon Tony tucked the wire under his collar. The doctor at the hospital had sent him to his heart doctor, who had seen him this morning and strapped him into something he had to wear under his shirt, so his heart didn't attack him.

Mary answered, "Pop, it's a heart monitor. It keeps track of his heart rhythm."

“FOR REAL?” Matty puckered his lips. “YOU GONNA BE OKAY, PAL?”

“Alla good.” Pigeon Tony wanted to talk about Evo, turning to Mary. “Ow we ’elp Evo? We beat them?”

Matty nodded. “YEAH, MARE, WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THE DRUG DEALERS? AIN’T IT AGAINST THE LAW, WHAT THEY DID TO EVO?”

“Yes, of course. It’s criminal solicitation. You can’t ask, command, or threaten somebody to commit a crime, and it’s also corruption of minors.” Mary blinked. “You asked me about the drug-free school zone, and that’s a sentencing issue, so it doesn’t come into play until after conviction. But you’re right, Pop, they’re lying to him when they said he was just being a messenger.”

“GOOD! SO WE GO TO THE COPS?”

“Not yet. I want you to take pictures of the drug dealers from the rooftop. You said Flex talked to Evo, so take plenty of pictures of him. Our firm investigator has a camera with a telephoto lens. I’ll lend it to you.”

“LIKE REAL DETECTIVES?”

Mary smiled. “Yes. I want you to tell me what Flex does all day and when he does it. But you have to stay on the roof. Don’t talk to the dealers, much less try to beat them up.” Her gaze shifted to Pigeon Tony. “Do we understand each other?”

“*Fascisti*,” Pigeon Tony muttered.

Mary let it go. “I also want you to take notes on what you see. Write down the cars that stop, what time they stop, how long they spend at the corner, and who they talk to. Can you see their license plates from the rooftop with the binoculars?”

“I don’t know.”

Pigeon Tony gestured, half and half.

“Then write down the license plates, if you can. What we’re trying to do is be specific, build a record. Then we’ll go to the cops.”

“*Fascisti*,” Pigeon Tony muttered again.

Mary blinked. “Pigeon Tony, I thought the drug dealers were Fascists.”

“Si.”

“The cops are Fascists too?”

“*Si.*”

Mary frowned, confused. “How can that be?”

Pigeon Tony waved her off. He didn’t know enough English to answer her question. He couldn’t tell his life story in a single sentence. He couldn’t explain war to somebody who had never been through one. He only knew he had survived a time when criminals and cops were the same, and there was only one way to get justice.

Mary shot him a look, reaching for a *sfogliatelle*.

Chapter Seven

Going home, Pigeon Tony sat in the passenger seat of Matty's big Delta 88, feeling as small as in the law office. He didn't like being driven around all the time, either. Lately he felt like he was never in charge, and he didn't think pictures of drug dealers would help Evo.

"YOU WORRIED?"

"No worry."

"MARY KNOWS WHAT SHE'S TALKIN' ABOUT. WE'RE DOIN' THE RIGHT THING."

Pigeon Tony scratched the heart monitor under his shirt. There were so many wires attached to his chest he felt like a TV. He didn't know what good it did to wear this thing. If his heart was going to attack him, he couldn't do anything about that either.

They traveled down Broad Street, leaving the office buildings behind. The brick row houses returned, and Pigeon Tony searched the sky for Verdi, but didn't see him.

They reached his house, and Matty double-parked in front of Teresa's hoagie shop.

"YOU WANNA PICK UP THE SAMMICHES? I GOTTA FIND A SPACE."

Pigeon Tony got out of the car. He checked the sky one last time, but no luck.

At least it was hoagie day.

Pigeon Tony entered the shop and joined the back of the line. Teresa's hoagie shop was small, and on one side was an orange counter behind which she and her cousins made the hoagies, plus the grill for cheesesteaks, sizzling in crumpled brown piles. On the other side of the room were tables, but locals called in or had a standing order like Pigeon Tony. Today they were having Italian hoagies, which were the best of Italy and America on a roll.

All kinds of people were in line—contractors with tool belts, painters in baggy white pants, and the two young girls who'd moved in across the street, their guitars in black cases strapped to their backs. On the counter were bags of wrapped sandwiches ready for pickup, and all of Pigeon Tony's neighbors ate here, plus the Sinatra Social Society, the Knights of

Columbus, the Ladies Auxiliary at Saint Monica's and Epiphany, and the local mah-jongg club.

The line shifted forward, and Teresa motioned it along. She owned the shop and knew everybody, like the Mayor of South Philly. Her eyes were bright brown, and her hair was dyed yellow as the sun. She had a nice big nose and a mouth always in motion, since all Italian women were bossy, but in a good way.

Pigeon Tony reached the front of the line, and Teresa burst into a big smile. "Pigeon Tony, you look good! You feelin' better?"

Pigeon Tony waved her off. "Alla good."

"You just had to get checked out?"

Pigeon Tony nodded.

"I heard about Evo, but leave it to the cops. You don't wanna stress yourself. Frank's worried about you."

"Alla good."

"Here you go." Teresa put Pigeon Tony's order on the counter, but it was wrong. The brown bag held only three Italian hoagies, and on top was a salad in a plastic bowl.

"No—" Pigeon Tony started to say.

"This is your new order. Frank said only salads from now on, but I put some sardines on top. I got 'em special, packed in water."

Pigeon Tony turned up his nose. He wanted his hoagie. It was hoagie day.

"Just give it a try." Teresa frowned, sympathetic. "I gave you hoagie dressing, so it'll taste like a hoagie. Frank treated you and the boys, too. It's free."

Pigeon Tony gave up, took the food, and left the shop.

He didn't think he was going to like salad day.

Chapter Eight

Pigeon Tony frowned as everybody had a good laugh over his salad.

“GIVE IT A TRY, PIGEON. EVERYBODY LIKES A NICE SALAD. YOU GOTTA EAT YOUR GREENS.”

Tony From-Down-The-Block nodded. “You gotta eat right.”

Feet snorted. “*You* don’t eat right.”

“One of us has to go first,” Tony From-Down-The-Block shot back. “Might as well be me. Anybody wanna bet?”

They all laughed, except Evo. “Don’t say that! Nothing can ever happen to you guys.”

Pigeon Tony didn’t want to upset Evo. “Is joke, Evo. Alla okay.”

Feet’s smile faded. “Evo, you don’t hafta worry about Pigeon Tony. It’s good he went to the hospital. They’re gonna fix him up.”

“YEAH, HE GOT A HEART MONITOR, EVO.”

Evo frowned. “What’s a heart monitor?”

“YOU WEAR IT ON YOUR CHEST.”

Evo turned to Pigeon Tony. “Can I see?”

Pigeon Tony lifted his shirt and showed him.

“Cool!” Evo touched the straps. “You have, like, *electrodes*. You’re Iron Man!”

“*Si!*” Pigeon Tony had no idea what he meant. They sat down, tucked in their napkin bibs, and unwrapped their hoagies, sharing with Evo. Pigeon Tony took off the plastic lid over his salad and counted six brown sardines on the lettuce. He could tell they weren’t in oil because they weren’t shiny. Mostly, they looked drowned.

He picked up the flimsy fork and ate a sardine, which tasted wet. He ate the rest only because he was hungry, then tore up the lettuce for his pigeons while they told Evo about what Mary had asked them to do. They finished their hoagies, showing Evo the camera Mary had lent them, with a lens like an elephant trunk.

“NOW LET’S GO PLAY DETECTIVE.”

Pigeon Tony watched the drug dealers through the binoculars, though cars and people kept blocking his view. The tall drug dealer named Flex was there, and so was the shorter one. Pigeon Tony couldn’t see their faces because it was too far away and they had on baseball caps, with

black shirts and baggy jeans.

“THIS LENS IS AMAZING!” Matty took a picture. “I SEE FLEX GOIN’ TO THE CAR.”

Feet checked his watch. “It’s 2:17 p.m., Pooch makes the deal,” he called out, like a criminal play-by-play.

“Got it!” Tony From-Down-The-Block made a note on loose-leaf paper. “What about the car? What kind is it? Do you see a license plate?”

“IT’S A WHITE TOYOTA, AN OLD ONE, BUT I CAN’T SEE THE PLATE. THINGS KEEP GETTIN’ IN THE WAY.”

Feet looked over. “Pigeon, can you see the plate?”

“No.” Pigeon Tony’s view was blocked, too.

Evo craned his neck. “Pigeon Tony, can I have a turn with the binoculars?”

Pigeon Tony didn’t think it was a good thing to involve Evo, so he handed the binoculars to Feet. “Evo, ’elp me.”

“But I want to be a detective too!”

“Please, come.” Pigeon Tony walked Evo to the loft, and they went inside. “We gonna get Verdi.”

“How?”

“You see.” Pigeon Tony went to Signora’s box, and the hen looked up at him. She still hadn’t eaten her seed, which wasn’t good. “Evo, you take Signora.”

“Cool!” Evo’s eyes lit up, and he reached for the bird. Pigeon Tony opened the screen door for Evo, who walked out cradling Signora. “So what do we do now?”

“You ’old her up.”

Evo raised Signora, with one hand on top of her.

“*Bravo.*” Pigeon Tony lifted his hands to show Evo. “You lif’ her. Push up and she fly.”

Evo looked worried. “You want her to fly away?”

“She no fly away.” Pigeon Tony hoped if they could fly Signora, Verdi might see her and find the loft easier. It was a pigeon racers’ trick, though it was considered cheating in a race. Pigeon Tony didn’t care about the training race anyway. He hadn’t even called in his times. He just wanted Verdi home.

“What will she do?”

“You see. Lif’ your hands inna sky.”

“I don’t want to lose her, too.”

“You no lose. Go.” Pigeon Tony lifted his hands. “*Uno, due, tre.*”

“*Uno, due, tre,*” Evo repeated, lifting the hen.

“Fly!”

“Fly, Signora!” Evo boosted the hen, and Signora took off, spreading her wings. “She’s flying!”

“*Brava, Signora!*” Pigeon Tony rested his hand on Evo’s shoulder, and they both watched as Signora took wing and turned slowly, beginning to circle the roof. She climbed into the sky, making widening circles above them.

“You think he’ll see her?” Evo asked excitedly.

“I ’ope,” Pigeon Tony answered, his heart lifting as the pigeon spiraled into the sky. In time they lost sight of her.

Evo looked over. “How long will she fly for?”

“Until he come. Or she tired.”

“Like, late at night?”

“*Si, si.* She come ’ome to sleep.” Pigeon Tony returned his attention to the sky, thinking of his Silvana. He wondered if she missed him, and if she was circling the sky right now. He worried she might be. He knew he would have, for her. They’d mated for life, too.

All afternoon, Matty, Feet, and Tony-From-Down-The-Block took notes on the drug dealers. Pigeon Tony watched the sky for Verdi and Signora as he sat at the table with Evo, who was quizzing himself on vocabulary: *abolish, accomplish, accurate*. Pigeon Tony didn’t know those words, and it bothered him that he couldn’t help Evo. The boy didn’t have many people who looked out for him and couldn’t afford any one of them to fail him.

“LET’S CALL IT A DAY.” Matty came back to the table, setting down the camera with a clunk. “I CAN’T SEE NO MORE. WE’RE DONE.”

“I give us credit.” Feet followed him, his loose-leaf papers filled with notes. “We did a good job.”

“We did.” Tony From-Down-The-Block snorted. “Meanwhile we’re in the wrong business.”

Matty shot him a look. “DON’T SAY THAT. ANY HONEST LIVIN’ IS BETTER THAN BEIN’ A CROOK.”

Feet nodded. “You gotta admit, they work hard. I’m beat, just

watchin' 'em."

"ANYBODY WANT A BEER?" Matty asked, on his way to the refrigerator.

Night fell, and Pigeon Tony sat on the rooftop, scratching his heart monitor and looking at the dark sky for the Verdis. Evo and the others had gone home, and Pigeon Tony must've dozed off, because he heard a distinctive flapping sound and when he opened his eyes, Signora was circling the loft. Alone.

Pigeon Tony rose, whistling for her, and she circled lower, corkscrewing herself toward the loft. He could hear the gentle fluttering of her wings, beating in a rhythm like a heart, and she came closer, wheeling and circling until she finally landed on the loft.

Pigeon Tony hurried over, opening the door, and she flew to her box. He went to her, picked her up, and made sure she hadn't injured herself. She hadn't, so he set her down, and she settled herself, roosting.

"Eat, Signora." Pigeon Tony showed her the seed mixed with salad. She didn't want it, either.

Troubled, he left the loft, crossed to the waste can, and took out the Hefty bag, since tomorrow was trash day. He left the rooftop, went downstairs, and opened the front door.

But he wasn't alone.

Chapter Nine

Flex had on a black baseball cap that shadowed his features, but Pigeon Tony knew it was him. He was tall and muscular, and Pigeon Tony recognized his black T-shirt and baggy jeans. No one else was on the sidewalk, and Teresa's was closed.

"Gramps, need a hand?" Flex grabbed the trash bag from him and tossed it in the trash can. "Aren't you gonna say thanks?"

Pigeon Tony was too angry to speak. His teeth clenched. Rage flared inside him.

He flashed on the Blackshirts who beat him. It felt like yesterday. They terrorized his town. Started a war.

"Your grandson missed school today. I hope he's not sick or nothin'."

Pigeon Tony's fingers balled into fists. Flex thought Evo was his grandson. In a way, he was.

"Yo, you gonna talk or what?"

Suddenly Pigeon Tony punched Flex in the jaw with all his might. Flex's head popped backward. His cap fell off, but he didn't fall over. His feet stayed rooted in his big sneakers. His hand went to his chin, and he started laughing.

"Gramps, for real? That all you got?"

Pigeon Tony flew at him, pummeling his chest. Flex put his hands on Pigeon Tony's shoulders and held him back. Pigeon Tony swung at the air, none of his blows landing. Flex laughed and laughed.

Pigeon Tony kept punching. He couldn't land a single blow. He took a last mighty swing, lost his balance, and fell on the sidewalk.

Flex turned and walked away, still laughing, but Pigeon Tony scrambled to his feet, scurried after Flex, and caught him by the T-shirt.

Flex whirled around in surprise, swatting at him, and a gun clattered to the sidewalk.

Pigeon Tony didn't hesitate. He picked up the gun and aimed it at Flex.

Flex stopped laughing.

Pigeon Tony's knobby finger encircled the trigger. He realized he could shoot Flex. Evo wouldn't have to worry about the man anymore.

But Pigeon Tony couldn't pull the trigger. It would be wrong. It wasn't justice.

“Gimme that!” Flex yanked the gun from Pigeon Tony’s hand.

“Flex, don’t hurt him!” Evo flew out of the house. “I’ll do it! I’ll do whatever you want!”

Pigeon Tony gasped, stopping Evo. “No, Evo! Inna ’ouse!”

Sofia came running out behind Evo. “Evo! Get back, no!”

Flex slid his gun into his waistband. “See you tomorrow, kid.”

Pigeon Tony, Sofia, and Evo watched in stricken silence as Flex walked away, laughing, into the darkness.

Chapter Ten

Pigeon Tony sat at the table with a bag of ice over his hand. His heart monitor lay on the table, trailing wires like something dead. Sofia had called Frank, who had called Mary, and they filled Pigeon Tony's kitchen. Evo was silent, his expression grave. Everyone was so upset they didn't even make coffee.

Mary frowned at Pigeon Tony, her blue suit wrinkled after a long day. "You pulled a gun on him? What were you thinking?"

"*Me dispiace*," Pigeon Tony apologized. His face went red with shame. He was facing a terrible truth. He was too old to protect Evo from Flex or anything else. Worse, Evo had tried to protect *him* by agreeing to work for the drug dealers.

"We had a plan." Mary waved a hand at the loose-leaf papers on the table. "You all took such good notes and pictures."

Frank looked over. "Mare, you can still go to the police, can't you? Flex came to the house about Evo. It's an escalation, if you ask me."

"Totally, but it hurts our position that your grandfather pulled a gun on him."

"But Flex threatened him. It was a veiled threat."

"The gun didn't have a veil, Frank."

Frank shrugged. "He didn't shoot or anything, and Flex was the one who came down here, to his block."

"What, is he in a turf war now?" Mary rolled her eyes.

Pigeon Tony listened silently, accustomed to younger people talking about him like he wasn't there.

Frank was saying, "Anyway, my grandfather was no threat to Flex. He's eighty-two."

"The law doesn't take that into account, Frank. You're not allowed to assault people, even younger, bigger ones."

"But you're allowed to recruit a fifth grader into a drug ring?"

"That was going to be my argument to the cops—until tonight."

"So now we're not going to the cops?"

Mary paused, then smiled crookedly. "Of course we're going. I don't mind a bad fact or two. In fact, we're going tonight."

Sofia bit her lip. "But we don't have to go with you, do we? I don't think that would be good for Evo."

“I agree, you both stay here. They’ll want to talk to Evo, and I’m going to encourage them to come to the house.”

“Thank you, Mary.” Sofia smiled shakily, and Evo nodded.

Mary put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Evo, we’re going to get you out of this situation. It’s not for you to do. And it goes without saying that you’re not going to help them in any way. It’s illegal for them to pressure you, or even ask you.”

Evo looked up at her. “But if I just do what they want, they’ll leave us alone.”

“The cops will make them leave you alone.”

“What about Pigeon Tony?”

“He’ll be fine. I’ll take care of him too.”

Pigeon Tony felt terrible. “No worry, Evo. Alla good.”

Mary turned to Pigeon Tony. “You stay here, too. I don’t want the police to ask you any hard questions.”

“I come.”

“No.”

“Si. I come.”

“Why?”

For Evo, Pigeon Tony thought but didn’t say. He gestured at the pictures and the notes. “I say what ’appen. I tell alla. I ’elp.”

Frank looked over. “He did help with the pictures and the notes.”

Mary shook her head. “Be real, Frank. You know how he feels about the cops. I don’t know how he’ll act.”

Frank waved her off. “He’ll be fine. Right, Pop?”

Mary looked over. “Will you behave, Pigeon Tony?”

“Si, si.”

“I’ll do the talking.”

“Si, si.”

“You can’t yell at them.”

“Si, si.”

“Or call them names.”

“Si, si.”

“You have to keep your temper.”

“A-okay!” Pigeon Tony told her, hoping for the best.

Chapter Eleven

Pigeon Tony stiffened at the sight. The precinct house was a box of stained concrete with small, dirty windows, out of place among the brick row houses. Streetlights illuminated the area with an unnatural brightness, gleaming on a massive row of white-and-blue cruisers. A yellowish light flickered over the entrance, and its door was propped open. Uniformed officers flowed in and out, their faces hard to see under the shiny brims of their caps. Their badges glinted, and they had guns in black holsters and long nightsticks. Two officers escorted a struggling man in handcuffs inside.

Pigeon Tony kept his head down and followed Mary up the steps. He told himself to stay calm. They entered a filthy lobby, which had a bulletproof window on one side and signs on the other. The air smelled stale, the floor was gritty, and the walls were of cracked yellowish tile. Pigeon Tony was surprised at how dirty the place was, having expected better order from Blackshirts.

They went to the second floor, through more dirty doors, and into a room full of beat-up gray desks stacked with messy papers, pencils, and official files. Boxes were everywhere. Eagles banners and Phillies pictures were taped to the walls. Bulletin boards were blanketed with papers.

“This way.” A police officer appeared and showed them to a tiny side room with scuffed white walls and a small table surrounded by black plastic chairs. He gestured them inside. “Sit down and make yourself comfortable, folks. I’ll let Detective Miller know you’re here.”

“Thank you.” Mary smiled, then met Pigeon Tony’s eye, warning him with one look to be good.

Pigeon Tony sat down, folding his arms.

Detective Miller was in his fifties, with serious brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses and dark hair silvering at the temples. His grayish-black mustache was neatly trimmed, and he had on a shiny blue tie with a dark suit jacket. He didn’t say much, just took notes in a skinny pad while Mary told him about Evo and Flex.

Pigeon Tony stayed quiet the entire time, as he had been told.

Mary leaned across the table. “Detective Miller, this is corruption of a minor and criminal solicitation, just for starters. You have to do something immediately because this situation is escalating to truly terrifying levels.

Flex came to my client's house tonight to threaten him—a ten-year-old boy.”

“Wait a minute.” Detective Miller raised a hand, and his shiny Cross pen caught the light. “Cars passing the scene called 911. We got multiple reports that it was Mr. Lucia who brandished the weapon.”

Pigeon Tony blinked, putting on his no-English face.

Mary scoffed. “Mr. Lucia didn't *brandish* the weapon. He merely picked it up off the sidewalk. He had no intention of *firing* it, for God's sake. It wasn't his gun, it belonged to Flex.”

Detective Miller frowned. “Why was the gun on the sidewalk anyway?”

“You should ask Flex. I understand he dropped it—”

“He dropped his gun? Really? What happened?” Detective Miller turned to Pigeon Tony. “Mr. Lucia, maybe you should tell me, rather than counsel. A 911 caller reported that you started an altercation with Flex—”

Mary interrupted, “Detective Miller, Mr. Lucia speaks very little English. I brought him only to support the evidence, since he helped take the photographs and notes. He's very close to my client, Evo.”

Detective Miller ignored her, frowning at Pigeon Tony. “Mr. Lucia, if you'd like a translator, I think we have somebody downstairs who speaks Italian.”

Mary interjected, “Detective Miller, I can translate if need be, but Mr. Lucia is irrelevant to the issue at hand. I've given you proof that Flex is a drug dealer, all you have to do is look at the photographs and notes. It's a day in the life of a dangerous felon.”

“But I don't understand how Mr. Lucia's involved.”

“He's not. That's my point exactly.”

“But did he brandish the weapon, or did Flex?” Detective Miller returned his attention to Pigeon Tony. “Did you point the gun at him, or he at you?”

“*Come?*” Pigeon Tony asked in Italian. *What?*

“Mr. Lucia, something tells me that you understand me just fine.” Detective Miller narrowed his eyes. “You need to leave this matter to us. You are not to take the law into your own hands.”

Mary interjected again, “But what are you going to do about it?”

“We have a unit dedicated to drug cases, and I will liaise with them. They were unavailable to meet you on such short notice.” Detective Miller

slid his pen into his breast pocket. “They’ll open a file and investigate. They’ll probably begin by interviewing the juvenile and his parents.”

“As I said, his name is Evo Novak. His parents are dead, and his aunt, Sofia Ravić, is his guardian. It would be best if they interview him at home. He’s a little boy, and he’s scared.”

“I’ll convey your request.” Detective Miller closed his notebook. “They’ll investigate the potential subject, look into his background, determine if there are any other concurrent investigations, and set a course of action.”

“How long will that take?”

“That’s up to them. I’m sure they’ll proceed as quickly as possible.”

Mary frowned. “But in the interim, my client needs to get back to school. Is there any way they can put this on the front burner, given the unusual nature of this case?”

Detective Miller blinked. “Unfortunately, Ms. DiNunzio, I’m not sure it’s particularly unusual. In the next few days, they will be in touch with you to arrange an interview with the family.”

“But school’s out for summer next week, and if he doesn’t get back, he’ll miss his final exams and get incompletes.”

Detective Miller chuckled. “It’s fourth grade, Ms. DiNunzio.”

“It’s *fifth* grade, and I don’t think you’re taking this as seriously as you should be, just because of his age!” Mary raised her voice, and Pigeon Tony thought she was yelling, but didn’t interrupt her. “The fact that he’s a child should entitle him to *more* protection, not less. School zones are supposed to be drug-free for a reason!”

“I understand the rationale behind the sentencing, but—”

“I doubt Evo was the first boy Flex threatened. We both know they target them because they get sent to juvy. You have to put a stop to it!”

Pigeon Tony could see Mary’s face turning red, and Detective Miller started getting angry, too.

“Ms. DiNunzio, as I say, we intend to investigate. We don’t need you to tell us how to do our job.”

“Then why hasn’t it happened yet? Why is drug dealing tolerated on any corner in *any* neighborhood?” Mary threw up her hands. “I’ve lived here all my life. Everybody can tell you where you can buy drugs, on which corner. How does it go on unchecked? Why isn’t anybody doing anything?”

Detective Miller recoiled. “Ms. DiNunzio, you need to calm down.”

“No, you need to get upset!” Mary shot back, and Pigeon Tony realized he had to do something. He touched Mary’s arm, but she kept talking.

“Detective Miller, you don’t seem to realize how urgent a matter this is. How terrifying it is for my client and for other children. Why don’t you put a squad car in the corner? Just park there.”

“We don’t have the manpower—”

“Then drive by, at least! Is that too much to ask? When do we get to the protecting-and-serving part?”

“I’ll look into it, and I don’t care for your attitude.”

Pigeon Tony rose, hoisting Mary to her feet, but she was on fire. “Detective Miller, I told Mr. Lucia that the law will protect Evo. Don’t you want to make that true? Don’t you want to make this country into what it purports to be? Into what it says it is?”

Detective Miller stood up, smoothing his tie. “I think this meeting is over.”

“So do I! I’m calling that drug unit, first thing. I’ll raise holy hell until somebody helps that kid!”

Pigeon Tony led Mary from the room and closed the door. “You no be’ave.”

Mary made a face. “I lost my temper, didn’t I?”

Pigeon Tony nodded. “Is okay.”

“Tomorrow, I’m going to his boss.”

“*Bene*,” Pigeon Tony told her, but he didn’t think it would make any difference.

He had to come up with something.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, Pigeon Tony was back on the roof, checking the sky for Verdi, but no luck. He hadn't slept last night, worrying about his pigeon, Evo, and his heart. He'd taken the monitor off, and he had to come up with a way to help Evo. Mary was trying her best, and maybe even the police were, too, but Pigeon Tony couldn't wait for them. Evo needed a hero.

He crossed the deck and entered the loft, where the birds roosted two by two, except for Signora, still alone. There was more whitish down at the bottom of her box, which told him she was upset. She hadn't eaten her seed or the salad he'd torn up for her.

He picked her up and stroked her neck. She felt light and had lost weight. He wanted to fly her again, to give Verdi another chance to find his way home, but if she wasn't eating, she wouldn't have enough strength. He didn't want her to give her life for her husband, as Silvana had for him so long ago, in a place and time that was supposed to be different from this one, but wasn't at all. People kept telling him to forget the past, but history kept repeating itself.

"Pigeon Tony?" Evo called to him, crossing to the loft. He had on his Phillies shirt and gym shorts, his hair still wet from his shower. "How are you? How's your hand?"

"Is okay." Pigeon Tony's hand hurt, but he wasn't about to say so.

"Thank you for standing up to Flex for me."

Pigeon Tony's throat caught. "Okay, but you no be with 'im. You no do not'ing for 'im."

"I won't." Evo's eyes glistened. "I knew you wouldn't kill him. You couldn't kill anybody."

Pigeon Tony gave Evo a hug, kissing his wet hair. "Love you," he whispered fiercely.

"I love you, too." Evo clung to him with a snuffle. Pigeon Tony released him, and Evo wiped his eyes with his hand. "Anyway, I thought I would see if you needed help, since I can't go to school."

"You feed. I clean." Pigeon Tony knew Evo liked feeding better than cleaning. Anybody would.

"Thanks." Evo went to the shelf and got the plastic container of birdseed. "Signora didn't eat?"

“No.”

“I’m worried about Verdi.”

“He come soon,” Pigeon Tony told him, though he didn’t think the bird was coming back.

“It’s weird, not going to school.” Evo shook some seed into the empty plastic bins. “I’m missing so much. I have a lot to make up.”

“Is okay.” Pigeon Tony felt terrible that Evo had so many worries—and the biggest worry of all now, one that even adults couldn’t solve. Least of all, him.

“I like school, you know? The kids give me a hard time, but it’s not so bad, and my aunt says it will get better. They just need to get to know me.” Evo put the scoop back in the seed bin. “Should we fly Signora again? Maybe he’ll see her this time.”

“She no eat. She weak.”

“I know, but maybe just this one time?”

“Okay, las’ time.”

“Can I fly her?”

Pigeon Tony nodded, and Evo went to Signora, picked her up, and cradled her against his skinny chest. Signora flapped her wings, itching to fly. Pigeon Tony held open the loft door, and Evo brought her out, raising her up.

“One, two, three, Signora, fly!” Evo lifted Signora into the air, and she started flapping her wings, taking flight and climbing quickly, beginning her circle, higher and higher until she was gone.

“*Brava*, Signora.” Pigeon Tony sent up a prayer with the bird.

“She’ll find him this time,” Evo whispered.

By midmorning, Matty, Feet, and Tony From-Down-The-Block had arrived, and the rooftop buzzed with the story of Pigeon Tony’s fight with Flex. Evo had rallied, telling the details, and Pigeon Tony went along, nodding and smiling, masking his worry.

“*MADONNE!* YOU TOOK HIS GUN? HOW THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT?”

Feet patted Pigeon Tony on the back. “You still got it! You musta scared the crap outa him!”

Tony From-Down-The-Block grinned. “I’da put a tenner on you, Pigeon.”

“He’s Iron Man!” Evo added, and they all laughed, even Pigeon Tony.

Suddenly Matty's phone rang in his pocket. "THAT'S MARY!" He pulled out his phone and flipped it open. "MARE, HOLD ON, I'LL PUT YOU ON SPEAKER." He squinted at the phone, then hit a button. "WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE BOSS?"

Mary's voice came on. "I met with him this morning, and I can't say it went great. He said they're going to do their best to fast-track the investigation, but I still don't think it will happen this week. I tried and I'll keep trying."

"A week?" Evo's mouth turned down. "I'll never be able to make that up. What if they don't pass me?"

"Evo?" Mary asked, on speaker. "I promise you, I'm going to be all over them to get this done quickly. I'll touch base with the school, too. I'll tell them what's going on. See if they can send some work home for you."

"Okay, thanks, Mary," Evo said, but he looked down.

"OKAY, MARE. LOVE YOU, BYE." Matty hung up, and the men fell silent, worried for Evo. Matty sighed. "TIME FOR LUNCH?"

"Yeah, let's eat," Tony From-Down-The-Block answered. "It's early, but I don't care."

Feet nodded. "I can eat."

"I go." Pigeon Tony patted Evo's shoulder, then went for the sandwiches.

Chapter Thirteen

Pigeon Tony headed down the sidewalk, turning the corner to Teresa's hoagie shop. One of her husband's lunch trucks was parked in front, since he picked up potato salad every Wednesday, when Teresa made it fresh.

Suddenly Pigeon Tony heard a familiar sound, a cooing that his heart knew instantly. Reflexively he looked up, and sitting on the top of the lunch truck were Verdi and Signora.

"*Bravi!*" Pigeon Tony threw up his hands. His heart filled with relief, and tears came to his eyes. He whistled, and in the next moment, Verdi took wing, and then so did Signora, circling together, flying upward toward the loft.

"Whoa!" The young girls with the guitars stopped on their way into the hoagie shop. "Do you *know* those pigeons?"

"*Si, si!* Verdi, 'e come home!"

"Oh, Teresa told us about you! You're the pigeon guy!"

"*Si, si!*" Pigeon Tony returned his attention to the sky, and the Verdis wheeled above the loft. He could hear Evo, Matty, Feet, and Tony From-Down-The-Block cheering on the rooftop.

"You got your pigeon back? Good for you!" Teresa's husband, Freddy, came out of the hoagie shop, carrying a big plastic container of potato salad. "Hey, Pigeon Tony, I heard about the fight with Flex last night. You got balls, takin' on that scum. Any way we can help you, let us know, okay?"

"T'ank you," Pigeon Tony answered in English, deciding to give it a try.

"If this keeps up, it's all over." Freddy scanned the intersection, which also held a grocery, the dentist, and a medical-supply store. "My wife's business and all these businesses, we're all in trouble then. They'll ruin *this* neighborhood, too."

Pigeon Tony got an idea.

It came from Verdi and Signora.

Half an hour later, Teresa's shop was full of customers, the young girls with the guitars, the contractors with the tool belts, the painters in their whites, Rebecca from the mah-jongg club, Pete from the Knights of Columbus, and everybody else, a bigger crowd than usual because it was

Potato Salad Wednesday.

But the line wasn't moving, and Teresa wasn't serving. She put her hands on Pigeon Tony's shoulders. "Go for it, Pigeon Tony. You tell them."

"No, no English." Pigeon Tony shook his head, nervous. "You."

"You'll do fine." Teresa turned to Matty. "You translate, Matty. God knows you're loud enough."

"PIGEON TONY, GET ON THE CHAIR SO THEY SEE YOU." Matty hoisted him onto the chair, and Pigeon Tony stood unsteadily on the plastic cushion. He had never seen so many faces looking up at him, especially not up.

"TELL 'EM WHAT WE'RE DOING. TELL 'EM WHY WE NEED THEM."

Pigeon Tony's mouth went dry. "My name Pigeon Tony. You know . . . these bad men, they sell drugs onna corner. They go to our Evo, and they try to make 'im 'elp."

One of the guitar girls said, "We heard from Teresa," and then everybody started talking. "Evo's the kid upstairs." "He's only ten." "They want him to be a go-between!" "It could be my kid!" "It could be my grandkids!"

Pigeon Tony straightened. "These bad men, they no stop. They take alla, they ruin alla, they hurt alla."

Matty added, "THE COPS ARE TAKING TOO LONG. EVO CAN'T WAIT AND NEITHER CAN WE."

The guitar girls nodded again. "This is our block. They hurt the whole neighborhood." Everybody got excited, agreeing. "Soon they'll sell drugs on this corner!" "They'll put Teresa out of business!"

Freddy wagged a finger. "We can't let 'em get away with this! We're with Pigeon Tony!"

"PIGEON TONY'S GOT A PLAN. HE'S GONNA TELL YOU NOW."

Pigeon Tony raised his arthritic fist. "We live 'ere. This our 'ome!" he said, meaning every word. He'd never felt so American. He loved this country. "Today, we gonna stop them. Today, we stand! For the right t'ing! For justice!"

Freddy called out, "Tell them the plan, Pigeon Tony!"

Chapter Fourteen

Pigeon Tony beamed from a red Mustang convertible that held Evo, Matty, Feet, and Tony From-Down-The-Block, waving like parade marshals. Teresa drove the car, which was followed by three boxy lunch trucks, like carbohydrates on wheels. Her husband, Freddy, manned the first truck, her cousins the other two, and all the vehicles bore hastily homemade signs that read, **POTATO SALAD WEDNESDAY! BEST CHEESESTEAKS IN SOUTH PHILLY! REAL ITALIAN HOAGIES!** Other signs included, **JOIN US! TAKE BACK OUR BLOCKS! DRUG DEALERS MUST GO!**

Their destination was the corner where Flex and his crew dealt drugs, and Teresa was moving her business uptown, until Pigeon Tony's idea worked or they ran out of ketchup, whichever came first. They were followed by cars full of older people who couldn't or didn't want to walk ten blocks for a cheesesteak.

Marching behind them was everybody else from Teresa's: the two guitar girls, the contractors, the painters, the mah-jongg club, and the Ladies Auxiliary, as well as the other corner business owners like the grocer and his stock boys, the dentist and his hygienists, and the rest of the neighborhood.

People stopped on the sidewalk, their heads turning, and those in the houses threw open their windows. They saw what was going on, hurried outside, and joined the parade.

They reached the corner, where cars were pulling away, their drivers deciding it wasn't the best time to buy drugs. Teresa pulled into one of the parking spaces, which were rapidly freeing up. Flex and his crew frowned, folding their arms, as two lunch trucks parked behind the convertible, and the third turned into the side street, double-parking.

Pigeon Tony got out of the convertible with Matty, Feet, and Tony From-Down-The-Block, leaving Evo with Teresa. He led the way to Flex, gesturing to the crowd. "Alla here. Alla eat here. You go."

Matty stood next to Pigeon Tony. "FLEX, YOU AND YOUR BOYS GOTTA GO. PEOPLE HERE GOTTA EAT."

Tony From-Down-The-Block didn't blink behind his Band-Aid bifocals. "We're comin' here every day and parkin' these lunch trucks."

Feet planted his orthopedic shoes and faced Flex. "We're gonna feed people until you leave for good."

Matty added, "THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT IT'S POTATO SALAD WEDNESDAY. IT'S LIKE ASH WEDNESDAY, ONLY WITH POTATO SALAD."

Flex glared at them, his drug dealers behind him. "We're not leaving."
"YOU'RE NOT GONNA PREY ON THESE KIDS ANYMORE."

Feet gestured at the traffic. "And you're not gonna sell a damn thing. Are you seein' what I'm seein'?"

Teresa's cousins were bringing out orders from the lunch trucks. Freddy and his men were unfolding tables and chairs on the sidewalk. The guitar girls and everybody else flooded the corner. Just then the police showed up in two blue-and-white cruisers, having been given the heads-up.

"HERE COMES THE CAVALRY."

Pigeon Tony looked Flex in the eye. "*Arrivederci.*"

Tony From-Down-The-Block snorted. "See ya, punk."

Feet chuckled. "You want a hoagie to go?"

Flex shrugged, eyeing the cruiser. "Whatever. We'll be back."

Pigeon Tony shook his head. "No. We come, alla day."

"HE'S RIGHT. WE'LL BE HERE EVERY DAY."

Flex turned away, and his crew followed. "Time's on our side, Gramps," he called over his shoulder.

"YEAH, BUT WE KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH IT."

Flex and the drug dealers took off, and everybody had a delicious lunch on a corner flooded with hungry customers and the aromas of Italian hoagies, sizzling cheesesteaks, and salads that were supposed to taste like hoagies, but didn't.

Evo waved to the kids walking home from school, and they welcomed him like a little hero. Pigeon Tony and the men treated the kids to hoagies, and Evo sat down at a table with his classmates, talking and laughing.

Pigeon Tony watched the scene, his heart happy and full, and in time Mary and Frank arrived, and everybody joined in, ate whatever they wanted, and didn't worry about their heart attacking them.

Pigeon Tony and everybody else did the same thing the next day, which was meatball-sub day. The cops came back, and the TV reporters showed up with their cameras. Teresa's business boomed on the new corner *and* the old one, and Flex and his crew drove past a few times but kept going. The police investigation kicked into gear, and the drug dealers

were gone for good.

Pigeon Tony never found out whether they went to jail, but he'd done the right thing, and so had everyone else, all standing up together, for Evo and for each other, because sometimes it takes more than one hero to get justice.

Sometimes, it takes a neighborhood of heroes.

Chapter Fifteen

It was a cool summer night, and Pigeon Tony sat with Evo on the rooftop. A citronella candle burned on the table, and the pigeons were asleep in their loft. Evo had quizzed Pigeon Tony on his vocabulary, since he had started to work on his English. He wanted to be able to help Evo and talk to the neighbors, since he'd met so many after everything that had happened. He'd even cut down to one cheesesteak a week, a settlement he'd negotiated with Frank.

Pigeon Tony looked over at Evo, coming to another decision. "No more race. No more."

Evo blinked, surprised. "You mean the pigeons?"

Pigeon Tony tried his English. "Yes."

"Why not?"

"No like. They stay 'ome, alla happy." Pigeon Tony smiled. "No more work."

Evo smiled back. "So they're retired?"

"Yes, tired."

"No, *retired*."

"*Re-tired*," Pigeon Tony said, rolling his *r*.

"*Bravissimo!*" Evo shot back.

And they both laughed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The publication of *Pigeon Tony's Last Stand* is a first for me in many ways, so this is where I get to say thank you. First, thank you so much to my readers, because you're the inspiration for this story. I've written thirty-five novels, having started writing way back in the 1990s, with the character of Mary DiNunzio. In the decades since then, I've been blessed to write books about Mary, her father Matty, and The Tonys, in the Rosato & Associates and the Rosato & DiNunzio series. That gift—of my entire career, mind you—is all due to the support, loyalty, and grace of my readers.

You don't have to have read any prior novels to appreciate *Pigeon Tony's Last Stand*, but readers who have will recognize these characters and know that the complete backstory of Pigeon Tony is told in *The Vendetta Defense*, which takes place immediately prior to *Pigeon Tony's Last Stand*. I haven't written a Rosato & DiNunzio novel in a few years, having branched out into domestic thrillers and historical fiction, but almost every day, I get an email from a reader wondering when I'm getting back to Rosato. So my readers encouraged me to write this story, and I'm so grateful because I really love these characters—and that's not bragging, because I didn't create them: they created themselves. (Frankly, they live in my head all the time, which is the magic of fiction.) So I'm always grateful to my readers, but my gratitude has never been more in order than here.

Thank you so much to Amazon, because it's the first time I've partnered with them to publish something, rather than clicking "Add to Cart." It's also the first time in decades I've written a short story for publication. I admit to worrying about whether I could write in the short form, since the conventional length of a novel is about 95,000 words and it takes me 450 words just to say hello. So I want to thank the great people at Amazon Publishing for their faith in me; namely, Grace Doyle, Kjersti Egerdahl, and especially Liz Pearson, who was my editor on *Pigeon Tony's Last Stand*. I discussed the story with Liz before I started writing, and she not only encouraged me but also clarified my thinking, and after I drafted the story, her edits improved my draft beyond measure. Thank you so much, Liz, for your hard work, insights, and great sense of humor.

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Final thanks and big love to my amazing daughter, Francesca Serritella, with whom I coauthored a series of humorous memoirs and who has become a novelist in her own right.

Simply put, Francesca is the joy of my life.

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“In this book of her heart, Lisa Scottoline delivers what her readers

expect and so much more, fast-paced intrigue, but also an authentic, tender coming-of-age tale of three best friends navigating the complexities of Fascism, war, political and family strife, and romantic competition.”

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“Make a plate of fettuccine, pour a glass of red wine, and settle in with this captivating tale. You will cry tears of sadness and joy. Scottoline’s Italian heritage combined with all her diligent research will keep this story in readers’ hearts.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“A beautiful, heartbreaking, wrenching love story set in the Second World War. It’s alive with characters I cared about deeply—including the remarkable city of Rome itself—and their courage in the face of Fascism.”

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“As Americans go through huge growing pains (hopefully leading to something positive) in terms of their own racist pasts, *Eternal* offers us hope. Somehow love really can save the day—romantic love, brotherhood, spiritual love, love for a good nation and the democratic process. May the scholarship and literary invention of this extraordinary novel find a home in the hearts of readers everywhere.”

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“I absolutely loved this page-turning novel. The writing is superb, and the historical research is outstanding. *Eternal* is an important book about the Holocaust and Fascist Italy and tells a story that needs to be told. As a Holocaust educator and a child refugee survivor of the Holocaust, I strongly recommend everyone read this book.”

—Dr. Miriam Klein Kassenoff, director of the Holocaust Teacher
Institute, University of Miami

“*Eternal* is remarkable historical fiction that brings to life Rome in the years leading up to and during WWII on the shoulders of unforgettable characters caught up on all sides of terrible events spinning beyond their control. Scottoline’s research is impeccable, her storytelling is propulsive, and the emotional times she describes are deep, moving, and yes, eternal.”

—Mark Sullivan, bestselling author of *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*

“The master storyteller Lisa Scottoline is at the height of her powers with *Eternal*. This magnificent epic is the story of three childhood friends who come of age during World War II Italy. You are with them in the worst of times as they navigate their lost dreams. You will root for their survival as they find redemption in a postwar world they must build with hope. Love. Faith. Friendship. Courage. It’s all here and it is essential reading.”

—Adriana Trigiani, bestselling author of *Lucia, Lucia* and *The Shoemaker’s Wife*

“In *Eternal*, Lisa Scottoline expands her formidable talents to World War II Italy and the heartwarming tale of three families whose intersecting worlds are torn apart. Scottoline captures the tragic beauty of wartime Rome through the eyes of unforgettable characters with whom readers will

hope and mourn and cheer. A passionate story of friendship, loyalty, and unbridled heroism.”

—Pam Jenoff, bestselling author of *The Lost Girls of Paris*

“*Eternal* is a gripping story of suffering and survival. It unspools at a heart-stopping pace, yet each page resonates with emotions: fear, hope, sorrow, yearning, love, empathy, sympathy, and ultimately, joy. The book lives up to its title. It will echo in the minds of readers for a long time.”

—Sandra Brown

“What Elena Ferrante did with her Neapolitan Quartet, Scottoline does for wartime Rome: brings it to life as the city is ripped apart by men in power and barely held together by the courage and decency of those who stand against them. *Eternal* is a must read.”

—Lorenzo Carcaterra

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—Karen Robards, author of *The Black Swan of Paris*

“Lisa Scottoline is a magnificent storyteller. *Eternal* is a triangular story of first love, told against the backdrop of WWII in Rome, that is both terrifying and magical; three young people at one of the worst times in history are filled with love, hate, fear, rage, and at the end, survival and hope. *Eternal* is brilliantly written. Scottoline hits new heights in this spellbinding tale of decades-old family secrets and rips apart the fragility of first loves. I was pulled in from the first page by the lives of Scottoline’s characters as they tried to make their way through events beyond their control in this richly detailed story that makes you feel like you’re right alongside them.”

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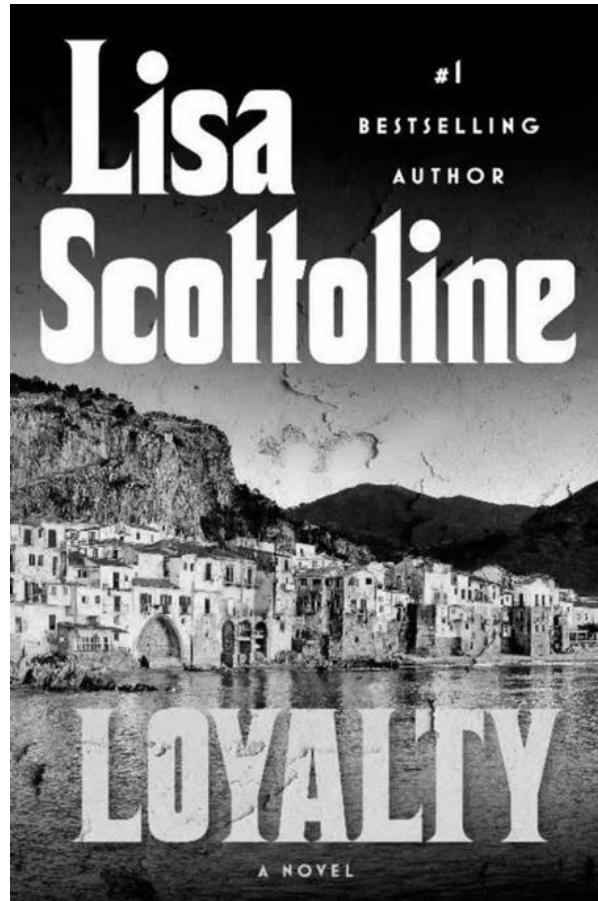
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Lisa Scottoline is the *New York Times* bestselling author of thirty-four novels and nine nonfiction humor books and has been published in thirty-five countries. Scottoline developed and taught the course Justice in Fiction at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and has served as the president of Mystery Writers of America.

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