

CHAPTER ONE

THE AFTERMATH

“You carried your father’s love with you through everything you did. You didn’t see it, but I saw it.”

—My Mother, Episode 110

While I was staring at the clock, the Towers were burning.

While I was bored in first period, I think it was chorus, my father was dying along with thousands of others.

While I was imagining scenarios in my head, the real one had already ended.

Two parallel dimensions of imagination and reality.

Two timelines running at once.

By the time I got home and saw the footage, it was already over.

My mother was now a 44-year-old widow. Born from an immigrant mother, five brothers and sisters in Brooklyn with a backbone that was seemingly made to handle life's difficulties.

My oldest sister, Jacqueline, was now a fatherless 19-year-old. A young woman who wears her heart on her sleeve, beautifully pure and authentic.

My remarkable middle sister Gina was now fatherless at the tender age of 17. She's unmistakably smart, willfully strong, and just like Jacqueline she has a "no matter what, no matter when, no matter where" mentality for her family.

And I—12 years old, clueless, frustrated, observant, internalizing everything—was pushed into a world I didn't have the emotional vocabulary to explain.

Before 9/11, we were a tight family. But we hadn't been tested. Our swords were sharp, innately ready for battle, but dormant. And then the battlefield came to us.

I'll never forget a moment from earlier that year. My sister Jacqueline and I were shooting hoops outside. One of my best friends had just lost his father. Between dribbles we were reflecting on his father's death and had a solemn moment of imagining if that happened to us. Looking back on it, it was an eerie foreshadowing.

At that time, I didn't know my ass from my elbow. (And to date, sometimes I find myself sitting on my elbow.) I was just a boy. But fate shoved me into emotional puberty long before my time.

It felt as if I was given a new pair of glasses. I didn't even wear glasses, but my metaphorical old pair were ripped off my face, stomped and shattered. This new set of lenses gave me not only a new vision of the world but a new understanding of what it meant to feel. And, at times a new confusion of what it meant not to feel.

I'd see my childhood friends with their fathers at Little League games, doing what fathers do—showing up. My dad used to do that. It wasn't just the piece of my heart that was missing. Now I had a constant reminder for what the world looked like without a father.

When my friends would get frustrated with their dads like normal teenage boys, I'd silently boil. *How dare they get frustrated! Don't they know how lucky they are?*

However, the rest of my family showed up, enduring the boring baseball games. I realized I didn't have my father, but I still had my family and friends.

Even before I ever heard the word *grief*, I knew my sisters and my mom were going through their own hell. Two young women at the beginning of their lives now flipped upside down. My mother, now widowed, in the first week of a brand-new job having to raise a young boy and navigate the grief of her daughters. Even though we were tight-knit each of us was, at times, isolated in our own grief. We all process differently. Grief made us say: we're in this together . . . but also alone. Same house, same father, same loss, but four different griefs. Four lenses, four timelines, four ways of loving, losing, and surviving. And, at a young age the focus was my immediate family. What got lost in youthful ignorance was that my aunt lost her brother. My grandmother lost her son. My cousins lost their uncle, and countless others lost a friend.

My mother exemplified courage. Nothing stood in her way when it came to her kids. And, if you did stand in her way you were likely to get smacked by the literal and figurative wooden spoon. She had to endure the death of her husband, the aftermath of death, work, her girls, and her son who was easily frustrated. I was impatient with her. She did nothing wrong. Chalk it up to teenage angst . . . or the fact that my dad was dead. Probably both.

But I know this much: my family was and is everything to me. And even with that support, something inside me felt empty.

Someone once told me I was "the man of the house now." It embedded itself in my mind, quietly looping for years. Some say it was too harsh for a boy to hear, but I needed to see it that way. To me, it was reality. A challenge. I needed to be there for my family. It's a belief I still carry today. Besides, my father just died violently in front of the world so nothing was too harsh for me to hear.

The beautiful part is realizing my mother and sisters raised me into that man. I learned from a balance of strong, capable women and the substitute father figures who stepped into my life with quiet consistency.

In the immediate aftermath, my mother was on autopilot. Deferred her own well-being and focused on everyone else's. Captain of a ship who was kept afloat by love. We were the reason she didn't sink. Not because of the support we gave her—but merely because we were alive. And grief wasn't only emotional—it was logistical. Financial decisions. Legal procedures. Bureaucratic audits determining how much my father's life was "worth." Money she didn't want. Paperwork she didn't want. All while steering three children in three different emotional universes intentionally superseding her own.

It wasn't until decades later that I saw my father's death certificate for the first time. Pages and pages of documents in the same file cabinet—all things my mother had to handle while grieving that I was oblivious to as a teen. I realized then how little I understood about what she shouldered. How unaware I was of the worlds crashing around me and limited grasp I had of my family's experience at the time.

We went back to school a week later. My mother told me many years later she didn't want us to get "fucked up." Or perhaps "too" fucked up. After weeks of meals delivered to our home from our incredible support system, one of my sisters asked if she could make a home-cooked meal instead. On my family's podcast, my mom said that request made her exhale—because for an Italian American family, food is love. And in that moment, a plate of homemade food wasn't just love; it was normalcy.

At the dinner table, my mom created a space where we could talk—or in my case, sit in silence. She told me later that I would just sit there quietly and watery-eyed, absorbing our new reality. Hearing that as an adult reminded me of the path I've taken—from holding everything in to finding comfort in expression and vulnerability.

My childlike behaviors still surfaced. My brother-in-law—*my brother*—played video games with me in the den during the adult chaos. I thought he was just hanging out. Now I know; he was giving me a sanctuary—an outlet to still be a kid. A piece of normalcy in the abnormal. He was a male figure I needed in my life. He was there for me all the time—even to this day.

All of this—dinner tables, video games, homemade meals, quiet moments, tears—was my mother's mission. A reminder that amidst grief, we can still find joy. Amidst pain, we can still find solace. Our world had shattered, but the rest of the world didn't crack with us. Life didn't stop so we wouldn't either.

It felt like doing a puzzle in the dark. We had to blindly find which pieces fit, guided by something unseen, hoping for connection and stability. Unnatural yet completely natural at the same time. Intentionally accidental. But we had to start somewhere—even if that somewhere was in the rubble.

