

Queen of the Big Time

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Extract



CHAPTER ONE

Today is the day my teacher, Miss Stoddard, comes to see my parents. She sent them a letter telling them she wanted to come to our house to discuss "the further education of Nella Castelluca." The letter is official, it was written on a typewriter, signed by my teacher with a fountain pen, dated October 1, 1924, and at the top there's a gold stamp that says PENNSYLVANIA EDUCATION AUTHORITY. We never get fancy mail on the farm, only handwritten letters from our relatives in Italy. Mama is saving the envelope from Miss Stoddard for me in a box where she keeps important papers. Sometimes I ask her to show it to me, and every time I read it, I am thrilled all over again.

I hope my parents decide to let me go to school in Roseto.

Delabole School only goes to the seventh grade, and I've repeated it twice just so I can keep learning. Miss Stoddard is going to tell my parents that I should be given the opportunity to go to high school in town because I have "great potential."

I am the third daughter of five girls, and I have never been singled out for anything. Finally, it feels like it's my turn. It's as though I'm in the middle of a wonderful contest: the music has stopped, the blindfolded girl has pointed to me, and I've won the cakewalk. I've hardly slept a wink since the letter arrived. I can't. My whole world will change if my parents let me go to school. My older sisters, Assunta and Elena, stopped going to school after the seventh grade. Neither wanted to continue and there is so much work on the farm, it wasn't even discussed.

I was helping Mama clean the house to prepare for our company, but she made me go outside because I was making her nervous. She's nervous? I don't know if I will make it until two o'clock.

As I lean against the trunk of the old elm at the end of our lane and look up, the late-afternoon sunlight comes through the leaves in little bursts like a star shower, so bright I have to squint so my eyes won't hurt. Over the hill, our farmhouse, freshly painted pale gray, seems to dance above the ground like a cloud.

Even the water in the creek that runs past my feet seems full of possibility; the old stones that glisten under the water look like silver dollars. How I wish they were! I would scoop

them up, fill my pockets, and bring them to Mama, so she could buy whatever she wanted. When I think of her, and I do lots during the day, I remember all the things she doesn't have and then I try to think up ways to give her what she needs. She deserves pretty dishes and soft rugs and glittering rings. She makes do with enamel plates, painted floorboards, and the locket Papa gave her when they were engaged. Papa smiles when I tell him about my dreams for Mama, and sometimes I think he wishes he could give her nice things too, but we're just farmers.

If only I could get an education, then I could get a good job and give Mama the world. Papa says I get my brains from her. She is a quick study; in fact, she taught herself to read and write English. Mama spends most nights after dinner teaching Papa to read English, and when he can't say the words properly, Mama laughs, and then Papa curses in Italian and she laughs harder.

I feel guilty being so happy because usually this is a sad time of year, as the green hills of Delabole turn toffee-colored, which means that soon winter will come and we will have the hog killing. Papa says that if we want to eat, we must help. All the chores around the killing used to bother me; now I don't cry much. I just stay busy. I help stretch the cloth tarps where the innards lay in the smokehouse before they're made into sausage, and line the wooden barrels where the scraps go. I have taught my sisters how to separate the innards and rinse them in the cool stream of the springhouse. There's always plenty of help. Papa invites all his friends from Roseto,

and we make a party of it. The dinner at the end of the day is the best part, when the women make tenderloin on the open pit and Papa's friends tell stories of Italy. It helps to laugh because then you don't think about the dying part so much.

"Nella?" Mama calls out from the porch.

"Over here!" I holler back.

"Come inside!" She motions me over and goes back into the house.

I carefully place my bookmark in the middle of *Jane Eyre*, which I am reading for the third time, and pick up the rest of my books and run to the house. It doesn't look so shabby since the paint job, and the ground around it is much better in autumn, more smooth, after the goat has eaten his fill of the grass. Our farm will never be as beautiful as the houses and gardens in town. Anything that's pretty on the farm is wild. The fields covered in bright yellow dandelions, low thickets of tiny red beach roses by the road, and stalks of black-eyed Susans by the barn are all accidents.

Roseto is only three miles away, but it might as well be across an ocean. When the trolley isn't running, we have to walk to get there, mostly through fields and on back roads, but the hike is worth it. The trolley costs a nickel, so it's expensive for all of us to ride into town. Sometimes Papa takes out the carriage and hitches our horse Moxie to take us in, but I hate that. In town, people have cars, and we look silly with the old carriage.

Papa knows I like to go into town just to look at the houses. Roseto is built on a hill, and the houses are so close together,

they are almost connected. When you look down the main street, Garibaldi Avenue, the homes look like a stack of candy boxes with their neat red-brick, white-clapboard, and gray-fieldstone exteriors.

Each home has a small front yard, smooth green squares of grass trimmed by low boxwood hedges. There are no bumps and no shards of shale sticking up anywhere. Powder-blue bachelor buttons hem the walkways like ruffles. On the farm, the land has pits and holes and the grass grows in tufts. Every detail in Roseto's landscape seems enchanted, from the fig trees with their spindly branches to the open wood arbors covered with white blossoms in the spring, which become fragrant grapes by summer.

Even the story of how Roseto became a town is like a fairy tale. We make Papa tell the story because he remembers when the town was just a camp with a group of Italian men who came over to find work in the quarries. The men were rejected in New York and New Jersey because they were Pugliese and had funny accents that Italians in those places could not understand. One of Papa's friends saw an ad in a newspaper looking for quarry workers in Pennsylvania, so they pooled what little money they had and took the train to Bangor, about ninety miles from New York City, to apply for work. At first, there was resistance to hiring the Italians, but when the quarry owners saw how hard the immigrants worked, they made it clear that more jobs were available. This is how our people came to live here. As the first group became established, they sent for more men, and those men

brought their families. The Italians settled in an area outside Bangor called Howell Town, and eventually, another piece of land close by was designated for the Italians. They named it Roseto, after the town they came from. In Italian, it means "hillside covered with roses." Papa tells us that when the families built their homes here, they positioned them exactly as they had been in Italy. So if you were my neighbor in Roseto Valfortore, you became my neighbor in the new Roseto.

Papa's family were farmers, so the first thing he did when he saved enough money working in the quarry was to lease land outside Roseto and build his farm. The cheapest land was in Delabole, close enough to town and yet too far for me. Papa still works in the quarry for extra money sometimes, but mainly his living comes from the three cows, ten chickens, and twelve hogs we have on the farm.

"Mama made everything look nice," Elena tells me as she sweeps the porch. She is sixteen, only two years older than me, but she has always seemed more mature. Elena is Mama's helper; she takes care of our two younger sisters and helps with the household chores. She is thin and pretty, with pale skin and dark brown eyes. Her black hair falls in waves, but there is always something sad about her, so I spend a lot of time trying to cheer her up.

"Thanks for sweeping," I tell her.

"I want everything to look perfect for Miss Stoddard too." She smiles.

There is no sweeter perfume on the farm than strong coffee brewing on the stove and Mama's buttery sponge cake, fresh

out of the oven. Mama has the place sparkling. The kitchen floor is mopped, every pot is on its proper hook, and the table is covered in a pressed blue-and-white-checked tablecloth. In the front room, she has draped the settee in crisp white muslin and placed a bunch of lavender tied with a ribbon in the kindling box by the fireplace. I hope Miss Stoddard doesn't notice that we don't have much furniture.

"How do I look?" Mama asks, turning slowly in her Sunday dress, a simple navy blue wool crepe drop-waist with black buttons. Mama's hair is dark brown; she wears it in a long braid twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck. She has high cheekbones and deep-set brown eyes; her skin is tawny brown from working in the field with Papa.

"Beautiful."

Mama laughs loudly. "Oh Nella, you always lie to make me feel good. But that's all right, you have a good heart." Mama pulls a long wooden spoon from the brown crock on the windowsill. She doesn't have to ask; I fetch the jar of raspberry jam we put up last summer from the pantry. Mama takes a long serrated knife, places her hand on top of the cool cake, and without a glitch slices the sponge cake in two, lengthwise. No matter how many times I try to slice a cake in two, the knife always gets stuck. Mama separates the halves, placing the layers side by side on her cutting board. She spoons the jam onto one side, spreads it evenly, and then flips the top layer back on, perfectly centered over the layer of jam. Finally, she reaches into the sugar canister, pulls out the sift, and dusts the top with powdered sugar.

ZIA IRMA'S ITALIAN SPONGE CAKE

*1 cup cake flour**6 eggs, separated**1 cup sugar**1/4 teaspoon almond flavoring**1/4 cup water**1/2 teaspoon salt**1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar*

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Sift the cake flour. Beat the egg yolks until lemon-colored. Gradually add the sugar. Blend the flour and almond flavoring in the water and add to the egg yolk mixture at low speed. Add the salt and cream of tartar. In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites until they are frothy and stand in peaks. Fold the egg yolk mixture into the whites just until blended. Pour the batter into a 10-inch ungreased tube pan. Bake for one hour or until cake springs back when lightly touched in center. Let sit in inverted position until cool.

"Now. Is this good enough for your teacher?" Mama asks as she lifts the cake onto her best platter.

"It looks better than the cakes in the bakery window." I'm sure Mama knows I'm lying again. As nice as Mama's cake is, I wish that we were serving pastries from Marcella's, the bakery in town. There's a pink canopy over the storefront and bells that chime when you push the front door open. Inside they have small white café tables with matching wrought-

iron chairs with swirly backs. When Papa goes there and buys cream puffs (always on our birthdays, it's a Castelluca tradition), the baker puts them on frilly doilies inside a white cardboard box tied with string. Even the box top is elegant. There's a picture of a woman in a wide-brimmed hat winking and holding a flag that says MARCELLA'S. No matter how much powdered sugar Mama sprinkles on this cake to fancy it up, it is still plain old sponge cake made in our plain old oven.

"Is the teacher here yet?" Papa hollers as he comes into the house, the screen door banging behind him.

"No, Papa," I tell him, relieved that she has not arrived to hear him shouting like a farmer. Papa comes into the kitchen, grabs Mama from behind, and kisses her. He is six feet tall; his black hair is streaked with white at the temples. He has a wide black mustache, which is always neatly trimmed. Papa's olive skin is deep brown from working in the sun most every day of his life. His broad shoulders are twice as wide as Mama's; she is not a small woman, but looks petite next to him.

"I don't have time for fooling around," Mama says to Papa, removing his hands from her waist. I am secretly proud that Mama is barking orders, because this is my important day, and she knows that we need to make a good impression. Roma and Dianna run into the kitchen. Elena grabs them to wash their hands at the sink.

"I helped Papa feed the horse," Roma says. She is eight years old, sweet and round, much like one of the rolls in the bakery window.

"Good girl," Mama says to her. "And Dianna? What did you do?"

"I watched." She shrugs. Dianna is small and quick, but never uses her dexterity for chores. Her mind is always off somewhere else. She is the prettiest, with her long chestnut brown hair streaked with gold, and her blue eyes. Because Dianna and Roma are only a year apart, and the youngest, they are like twins, and we treat them as such.

"Everything is just perfect." I give my mother a quick hug.

"All this fuss. It's just Miss Stoddard coming over." Assunta, the eldest, is a long, pale noodle of a girl with jet-black hair and brown eyes that tilt down at the corners. She has a permanent crease between her eyes because she is forever thinking up ways to be mean.

"I like Miss Stoddard," Elena says quietly.

"She's nobody special," Assunta replies. Elena looks at me and moves over to the window, out of Assunta's way. Elena is very much in the shadow of the eldest daughter; then again, we all are. Assunta just turned nineteen, and is engaged to a young man from Mama's hometown in Italy. The marriage was arranged years ago; Assunta and the boy have written to each other since they were kids. We are all anxious to meet him, having seen his picture. He is very handsome and seems tall, though you really can't tell how tall someone is from a photograph. Elena and I think the arrangement is a good idea because there is no way anyone around here would want to marry her. Assunta doesn't get along with most people, and the truth is, most boys are scared of her.

"Teachers are the same wherever you go. They teach," Assunta grunts.

"Miss Stoddard is the best teacher I ever had," I tell her.

"She's the *only* teacher you ever had, dummy."

She's right, of course. I have only ever gone to Delabole School. For most of the last year, I've helped Miss Stoddard teach the little ones how to read, and when school is dismissed, she works with me beyond the seventh-grade curriculum. I have read Edgar Allan Poe, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Brontë, and loved them all. But now Miss Stoddard believes I need more of a challenge, and she wants me to go to a school where I will learn with others my age.

Assunta leans on the table and eyes the cake. Mama turns to the sink. Papa has gone into the pantry, so Assunta seizes the moment and extends her long, pointy finger at the cake to poke at it.

"Don't!" I push the platter away from her.

Assunta's black eyes narrow. "Do you think she'll be impressed with sponge cake? You're ridiculous." I don't know if it's the way she is looking at me, or the thought that she would deliberately ruin a cake for my teacher, or fourteen years of antagonism welling up inside of me, but I slap her. At first, Assunta is surprised, but then delighted to defend herself. She hits me back, then digs her fingernails into my arm.

Mama pulls me away from her. Assunta always ruins everything for me, but this is one day that cannot be derailed by my sister. "What's the matter with you?" Mama holds on to me.

I want to tell my mother that I've never wanted anything so much as the very thing Miss Stoddard is coming to talk to them about, but I've made a habit of never saying what I really want, for fear that Assunta will find some way to make sure I don't get it. Mama never understands, she can't see what kind of a girl my sister really is, and demands that we treat each other with respect. But how can I respect someone who is cruel? My parents say they love each of us equally, but is that even possible? Aren't some people more lovable than others? And why do I have to be lumped in with a sister who has no more regard for me than the pigs she kicks out of the way when she goes to feed them in the pen? Assunta is full of resentment. No matter what her portion might be, it is never enough. There is no pleasing her, but I am the only one around here who realizes this.

Elena, who hates fighting, hangs her head and begins to cry. Dianna and Roma look at each other and run outside.

"I should tell your teacher to go straight home when she gets here, that's what I should do," Papa says. Assunta stands behind him, smooths her hair, and smirks. She tells Papa I threw the first punch, so it is I who must be punished.

"Please, please, Papa, don't send Miss Stoddard away," I beg. I am sorry that I fell for Assunta's jab, and that the whole of my future could be ruined by my impulsive nature. "I am sorry, Assunta."

"It's about time you learned how to behave. You're an animal." Assunta looks at Mama and then Papa. "You let her get away with everything. You'll see how she ends up." As-

sunta storms upstairs. I close my eyes and count the days until Alessandro Pagano comes from Italy to marry her and take her out of this house.

"Why do you always lose your temper?" Papa asks quietly.

"She was going to ruin the cake."

"Assunta is not a girl anymore. She's about to be married. You musn't hit her. Or anyone," Papa says firmly. I wish I could tell him how many times she slaps me with her hairbrush when he isn't looking.

Mama takes the cake and goes to the front room.

"I'm sorry," I call after her quietly.

"You're bleeding," Elena says, taking the *moppeen* from the sink. "It's next to your eye." She dabs the scratch with the cool rag and I feel the sting.

"Papa, you musn't let her meet Mr. Pagano before the wedding day. He'll turn right around and go back to Italy."

Papa tries not to laugh. "Nella. That's enough."

"He has to marry her. He has to," I say under my breath.

"They will marry," Papa promises. "Your mother saw to it years ago."

Papa must know that the deal could be broken and we'd be stuck with Assunta forever. Bad luck is wily: it lands on you when you least expect it.

Papa goes out back to wash up. I put the jar of jam back in the pantry. Elena has already washed the spoon and put it away; now she straightens the tablecloth. "Don't worry. Everything will be fine," she says.

"I'm going to wait on the porch for Miss Stoddard," I tell

Mama as I push through the screen door. Once I'm outside, I sit on the steps and gather my skirts tightly around my knees and smooth the burgundy corduroy down to my ankles. The scratch over my eye begins to pulse, so I take my thumb and apply pressure, something Papa taught me to do when I accidentally cut myself.

I look down to the road that turns onto the farm and imagine Assunta in her wedding gown, climbing into the front seat of Alessandro Pagano's car (I hope he has one!). He revs the engine, and as the car lurches and we wave, her new husband will honk the horn and we will stand here until they disappear onto Delabole Road, fading away to a pinpoint in the distance until they are gone forever. That, I am certain, will be the happiest moment of my life. If the angels are really on my side that day, Alessandro will decide he hates America and will throw my sister on a boat and take her back to Italy.

"Nella! Miss Stoddard is coming!" Dianna skips out from behind the barn. Roma, as always, follows a few steps behind. I look down the lane, anchored at the end by the old elm, and see my teacher walking from the trolley stop. Miss Stoddard is a great beauty; she has red hair and hazel eyes. She always wears a white blouse and a long wool skirt. Her black shoes have small silver buckles, which are buffed shiny like mirrors. She has the fine bone structure of the porcelain doll Mama saved from her childhood in Italy. We never play with the delicate doll; she sits on the shelf staring at us with her perfect ceramic gaze. But there's nothing fragile about Miss

Stoddard. She can run and jump and whoop and holler like a boy. She taught me how to play jacks, red rover, and checkers during recess. Most important, she taught me how to read. For this, I will always be in her debt. She has known me since I was five, so really, I have known her almost as long as my own parents. Roma and Dianna have run down the lane to walk her to our porch; Miss Stoddard walks between them, holding their hands as they walk to the farmhouse.

"Hi, Nella." Miss Stoddard's smile turns to a look of concern. "What did you do to your eye?"

"I hit the gate on the chicken coop." I shrug. "Clumsy. You know me."

The screen door creaks open.

"Miss Stoddard, please come in," Mama says, extending her hand. I'm glad to see Miss Stoddard still has her gloves on; she won't notice how rough Mama's hands are. "Please, sit down." Mama tells Elena to fetch Papa. Miss Stoddard sits on the settee. "This is lovely." She points to the sponge cake on the wooden tray. Thank God Mama thought to put a linen napkin over the old wood.

"Thank you." Mama smiles, pouring a cup of coffee for Miss Stoddard in the dainty cup with the roses. We have four bone china cups and saucers, but not all have flowers on them. Mama gives a starched lace napkin to her with the cup of coffee.

"Don't get up," Papa says in a booming voice as he enters the room. Papa has changed out of his old work shirt into a navy blue cotton shirt. It's not a dress shirt, but at least it's

pressed. He did not bother to change his pants with the suspenders, but that's all right. We aren't going to a dance, after all, and Miss Stoddard knows he's a farmer. I motion to Dianna and Roma to go; when they don't get the hint, Elena herds them out.

Mama sits primly on the settee. Papa pulls the old rocker from next to the fireplace. I pour coffee for my parents.

Miss Stoddard takes a bite of cake and compliments Mama. Then she sips her coffee graciously and places the cup back on the saucer. "As I wrote you in the letter," she begins, "I believe that Nella is an exceptional student."

"Exceptional?" Papa pronounces the word slowly.

"She's far ahead of any student her age whom I've taught before. I have her reading books that advanced students would read."

"I just finished *Moby-Dick*," I announce proudly, "and I'm reading *Jane Eyre* again."

Miss Stoddard continues. "She's now repeated the seventh grade twice, and I can't keep her any longer. I think it would be a shame to end Nella's education." Miss Stoddard looks at me and smiles. "She's capable of so much more. I wrote to the Columbus School in Roseto, and they said that they would take her. Columbus School goes to the twelfth grade."

"She would have to go into town?"

"Yes, Papa, it's in town." The thought of it is so exciting to me I can't stay quiet. How I would love to ride the trolley every morning, and stop every afternoon after school for a macaroon at Marcella's!

"The school is right off Main Street, a half a block from the trolley station," Miss Stoddard explains.

"We know where it is." Papa smiles. "But Nella cannot ride the trolley alone."

"I could go with her, Papa," Elena says from the doorway. She looks at me, knowing how much it would mean to me.

"We cannot afford the trolley twice a day, and two of you, well, that is out of the question."

"I could walk! It's only three miles!"

Papa looks a little scandalized, but once again, Elena comes to my rescue. "I'll walk with her, Papa." How kind of my sister. She was average in school and couldn't wait to be done with the seventh grade. And now she's offering to walk an hour each way for me.

"Thank you, Elena," I tell her sincerely.

"Girls, let me speak with Miss Stoddard alone."

The look on Papa's face tells me that I should not argue the point. Mama has not said a word, but she wouldn't. Papa speaks on behalf of our family.

"Papa?" Assunta, who must have been eavesdropping from the stairs, comes into the room. "I'll walk her into town." Elena and I look at each other. Assunta has never done a thing for me, why would she want to walk me into town?

"Thank you," Papa says to Assunta and then looks at me as if to say, *See, your sister really does care about you.* But I am certain there must be some underlying reason for Assunta to show this kind of generosity toward me. There must be something in it for her!

"I am starting a new job in town next month," Assunta explains to Miss Stoddard. Elena and I look at each other again. This is the first we have heard of a job. "I am going to work at the Roseto Manufacturing Company. I have to be at work by seven o'clock in the morning."

Elena nudges me. Assunta has been keeping secrets. We had no idea she was going to work in Roseto's blouse mill.

"School begins at eight," Miss Stoddard says.

"I'll wait outside for them to open the school. I don't mind!" Miss Stoddard smiles at me. "Really, I'll stand in the snow. I don't care!"

"Nella, let me speak to your teacher alone." Papa's tone tells me he means it this time, so I follow Elena up the stairs and into our room.

"Can you believe it? I'm going to school!" I straighten the coverlet on my bed so the lace on the hem just grazes the floorboards.

"You deserve it. You work so hard."

"So do you!"

"Yes, but I'm not smart." Elena says this without a trace of self-pity. "But you, you could be a teacher someday."

"That's what I want. I want to be just like Miss Stoddard. I want to teach little ones how to read. Every day we'll have story hour. I'll read *Aesop's Fables* and *Tales from Shakespeare* aloud, just like she does. And on special days, like birthdays, I'll make tea cakes and lemonade and have extra recess."

Assunta pushes the door open.

"When did you decide to work at the mill?" Elena asks her.