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BROKEN PROMISES, SHATTERED DREAMS  
AND MEANT-TO-BE'S

# SAVE THE LAST DANCE



CARNEGIE HALL



WRITTEN BY

# M.G. Crisci

Also by M.G. Crisci

Call Sign, White Lily

Indiscretion

Papa Cado

Rise and Fall of Jackson-Peale

Seven Days in Russia

This Little Piggy





ORCA PUBLISHING COMPANY  
Carlsbad, CA 92011

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Designed by Good World Media  
Edited by Raymond Mancini Sr.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control No.  
2010929931

ISBN 978-0-9663360-9-2

To Mom



# Prologue

At 92, she wasn't as spry as she used to be. The bones creaked a little, and there were the usual morning aches and pains. But she was still sharp as a tack, enjoyed walking, reading, and chatting with friends on the phone. Hell, she had even learned to email and found two childhood friends from the old neighborhood on Facebook.

Life had been good. A husband who adored her, two affectionate children who made it their business to stay in touch, and five grandchildren whom she spoiled to tears. Most everybody was gone now, but it wasn't something she obsessed about—it was just the natural order of things. She understood it wouldn't be long before she joined that great reunion in the sky. In fact, it was something she was looking forward to.

Today had been the perfect June day in Manhattan. Clear blue skies, low 70's, virtually no humidity, and a gentle cool breeze that invigorated her as she strolled from her apartment off Lexington and 74<sup>th</sup> to 81<sup>st</sup> and back.

She had just finished eating a pastrami sandwich from Epstein's Deli around the corner—at her age, she rationalized, a little saturated fat or sticky cholesterol didn't matter. Besides, she absolutely hated to cook and loved those pickled tomatoes that Mr. Epstein always added to her order. Even in Manhattan, there weren't many places left where you could get a crunchy, garlicky, kosher pickled tomato.

Her best friend was her television, although she hated the remote control. "Why can't I just turn the dial," she'd mutter. It was almost 9 p.m. and she had just finished watching her favorite show, *All in the Family* with Archie Bunker. She

shuffled over to the window. Clouds had blanketed the moon. The streets were quieter than usual, no police sirens, no chugging buses, no fire engines. Time to make another decision: read the paper, watch more television or go to the Cotton Club and dance with Charlie. She chose the latter; she always did—the silky voice of popular baritone Russ Colombo made her swoon like a teenager.

She looked into the mirror. The wrinkles were more than she remembered. Her vanity entered. She took out a jar of Pond's Cold Crème, and spread a thin layer over her face and on her neck. She'd been performing that ritual for 71 years, and she wasn't about to stop now. She again looked in the mirror. *Better, much better*, she thought.

Her hand shook nervously. She took a deep breath, opened the desk drawer, and removed a glossy, 16-page Carnegie Hall concert program dated May 1939. The pages were worn, the cover-colors faded, but Charlie, Lou and Joe's autographs were still crystal clear, and the photos of Charlie and his musical cronies had held up surprisingly well. She sank comfortably into her dusty-rose reading chair—dusty rose had always been her favorite color.

She flipped to the center-page program selections. "Charlie, are you there?" she whispered. Her mind transported her to another place. In her favorite frilly, white-lace dress, she was standing in the middle of the dance floor at the Cotton Club. Colombo crooned in the background:

While we're apart  
Don't give your heart to anyone  
And don't forget who's taking you home  
And in whose arms you're gonna be  
So darlin', save the last dance for me...

Charlie put his arms around her waist, she rested her head on his chest. She could feel a hundred pairs of eyes staring as they glided around the room.

She wanted the evening to last forever. He could sense her feelings, hear her thoughts. He whispered in her ear, “Fanny, I feel the same way,” and kissed her on the cheek. The music continued. They paused. “Fanny, I’ve want-ed to say something for such a long, long time. I’m so sorry, I should have...” She put her finger on his lips.

“Me too, but does it matter anymore?” The clock struck midnight.

“I guess I have to go,” he said.

She looked into his dark brown eyes. “Same time, same place.” He smiled.

Fanny closed the program and fell fast asleep in her dusty-rose chair. The clouds moved. Moonlight flooded the room.

*Chapter 1*

# Enrico's Codfish



*Mulberry Street in Lower Manhattan,  
where Enrico Balducci sold his fish.*

July 26, 1912, was a hot and humid day on the narrow winding streets of Lower Manhattan. The thermometer outside the pharmacy on Mulberry Street read 98°. Honking model T's, horse-drawn delivery trucks and milk carts wove their way through a maze of animated shoppers and vendors negotiating "the best price" for a colorful med-

ley of fruits and vegetables stacked on wooden-wheeled pushcarts that lined the streets.

At the junction of Mott and Grand Streets, Weinstein's Fabric Store was teeming with bargain-hunters thanks to his artful, paid advertising campaign. Old man Weinstein had given two of his teenage part-timers, Johnny Giambelli and Frankie Donatello, 25 cents each to spread the rumor that a portion of Weinstein's new shipment of fabric bolts had been damaged in transit, and Mr. Weinstein was thinking of having a first-come, first-served sale for his best customers.

Pushcart vendor Enrico Balducci heard about it and decided to seize the moment. His cart, stacked with rows of fresh fish displayed on mounds of glistening crushed ice, "coincidentally" broke down in the perfect spot to capture the attention of Weinstein's customers on their way in and out of the store. Unfortunately, the spot also happened to be a designated loading zone.

"Enrico," said Officer James O'Reilly, trying to bring some order to the growing chaos outside Weinstein's. "Get that damn cart outta here!"

"My wheel go batta-bing. Loose. Dangerous. Gotta get somebody to fix. No?"

O'Reilly smiled and gave the two large wooden wheels a firm kick. "Enrico, the cart looks fine to me."

"Officer Jim," replied a warmer, friendlier Enrico. "The heat melt the ice, make the fish smell. Gotta sell quick. Like you, I got family to feed." Enrico could see O'Reilly was wavering. He went for the close. "How about we make a deal? Take fish home to your wife for dinner. My cod, moist, very fresh. So is my flounder and sea bass. See?"

The O'Reilly family had fresh fish that evening.

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By late afternoon, most of the fish had been sold. Enrico spotted two familiar chubby, olive-skinned women in long

black skirts sipping ice-cold lemonade on the third floor fire escape of their brick tenement building across the street. He called out, "Mrs. Coscia, Mrs. Imperale, see the nice fresh fish. Come and get it, ladies, I give you my best price."

Two women came down, touched, poked and smelled the fish. "Enrico, you last fish no taste good," chided Mrs. Imperale. "You make up in the price today."

"Mrs. Imperale, that no can be," said Enrico with a smile and a shrug.

"Enrico, you telling me I lie."

"Mrs. Imperale, you no lie and I no bring bad fish."

"Then how about we negotiate?" smiled Mrs. Imperale.

"Ladies, this cod of all cods! They so fresh they no even close their eyes yet. They come from the clean, cold waters of the Hudson near Poughkeepsie. I listen to them talk on the way down here today. They say, 'Please, Enrico, I want to go home with Mama Coscia and Mama Imperale.'"

"Because the fish talk doesn't means I gonna pay more," teased Mama Imperale. "I no want to keep them as pets, I want to cook them."

"Fifty cents and you take two pounds, your choice."

The women started to wave their hands and arms, "*è troppo caro, è troppo caro.*" They counter-offered, "Twenty cents. No more."

Enrico protested vociferously. "You insult me with your offer. I need to make some kinda profit or my kids no eat."

"Let them eat the fish. That offer is final."

"Okay. Okay. You steal today." The deal was done. Enrico wrapped the fish in newspapers and gave the ladies a hug. In reality, everybody was happy. Enrico had received exactly the price he wanted, and the ladies believed they had negotiated a good deal.

*Chapter 2*

# Terrible Tess



*Fanny, age seven, the little girl who stole Charlie's heart.*

Up the block from the fish negotiations, a handsome little eight-year-old boy was engrossed in the most important project of his whole life. A pretty little seven-year-old girl watched intently. "Watcha doing, Charlie?" asked the shy, demure Fanny Coscia, head bowed and her two tiny feet turned inward.

“Making a picture, Fanny,” smiled handsome young Charlie Imperale, drawing on the sidewalk near the corner of Mulberry and Grand Street in the heart of little Italy. “It’s for you.”

“For me?” gushed Fanny self-consciously.

Fanny’s baptismal name was actually Filomena, which was the name of a tiny hilltop village outside Naples where her mama was born. Despite having migrated to the United States for a better life, Mama always wanted her daughter to remember her roots. Some time back, Charlie had christened his little friend Fanny, partially because his slight stutter (which mysteriously disappeared at age twelve) made Filomena sound like a broken record—“Filo me me me na”—and partially because Fanny’s long brown curls blowing in the soft summer breeze reminded him of the blades of a giant fan.

Fanny’s Mama, who was perhaps the greatest influence on her daughter, believed girls should always act and dress like ladies—no “drag-tag” dresses as she called them. Fanny looked like a picture postcard: peaches and cream complexion, pink-and-white checkered dress with delicate rose-colored butterflies and brown curls flowing beneath a soft-brimmed, yellow straw hat.

The little artist, blending a pocketful of blue, pink, yellow and white chalk into his palette, diligently transferred the images lodged in his mind onto the oversized concrete canvas. Fanny, fascinated and frozen in the middle of the street, didn’t see the horse-drawn carriage, laden with huge milk cans, clip-clopping directly into her path. Charlie leapt to his feet, ran over to Fanny, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her out of harm’s way. Fanny started to shake and cry, realizing what had just transpired. Charlie wrapped his strong arms around her. “It’s all right, Fanny; Charlie would never let anything happen to you. Are you okay?”

Charlie sounded older than his eight years, “How about we just sit on the sidewalk until I’m done.”

The elements on the canvas began to take on distinct shapes. A big wooden boat with white sails rested calmly on a shimmering blue sea. The sun’s bright, cheerful, yellow rays played on the water, providing the illusion of lightning bolts dancing on the surface. Charlie stood up and walked around the canvas. He noticed the intricate detail of Fanny’s dress. He paused and looked at his canvas. Something was missing. He stared at Fanny for a few seconds, made a picture frame with his fingers, and then returned to his canvas. Cleverly blending pink and blue sticks of chalk, Charlie added two rose-colored butterflies fluttering near the boat—just like the ones on Fanny’s dress! “Ta, da,” said Charlie proudly, waving his hand.

Fanny stared at the enormous seascape—perhaps twice the size of Charlie. She could feel her heart beating through her dress. “Charlie, it’s so, so beautiful!” She wanted to say more, but at the tender age of seven, she barely understood what she was feeling. She just knew it felt good. She wanted to give Charlie a big hug, but Mama’s recent advice made an unscheduled appearance in her conscience *Fanny, you gotta be careful with boys. The Coscia family are “proper ladies.” We never tell a boy how we feel until he gonna say first. We wait our turn. And, we never, never do the inviting. Capisce?*

Charlie crouched over and scrolled a title across the top of the painting: *Fanny, I Love You*. Then, like an accomplished artist seeking a measure of immortality, Charlie signed his name in small block letters in the lower right hand corner, “C. Imperale 1912.”

Fanny’s body tingled with excitement. She struggled to retain the sense of propriety Mama had instilled, but finally, overcome with emotion, she said, “Charlie, I love you too,” delivering a soft, gentle kiss on his cheek.



Charlie's scrawny six-year-old sister Tess decided enough was enough. Fanny had monopolized her brother's attention far too long! Tess, the Imperale family's 38-pound tomboy, wanted her brother to play with her. The youngest of the four Imperale children—and the only girl—she was accustomed to getting her way. “Charlie, I want you to play hopscotch with me right now!” demanded Tess over the rumbling and the honking street sounds.

“In a few minutes, Sis. I've still got a little more work to do on my painting,” said Charlie, as he winked in Fanny's direction.

Tess noticed and thought Charlie was making fun of her in front of Fanny. (That moment, that simple misunderstanding, would fester and grow in Tess's mind for most of her adult life.) “You've spent enough time on that stupid picture,” she pouted. “You know it's going to wash away when it rains,” she said staring directly at Fanny, hands on her hips. “Then what are you going to do about your precious picture?”

Charlie looked at the sky. The rain clouds were rolling in. Tess had a point. Mild-mannered Fanny suggested a compromise. “How about we play jacks while Charlie finishes? Then he can play with you all you want.” Fanny knew Tess loved to play jacks. In her mind, she was the neighborhood champion... among the girls.

“I'm the best, right Charlie?” asked Tess, with a hint of defiance. “Can't beat me. Wanna try?”

“Tess, stop being so mean to Fanny. You are starting to sound like Tess's evil twin sister Bess. Remember. Nobody wants to play with Bess” The Imperales had found that Tess did not like the notion of an evil alter ego. The evil twin nomenclature typically calmed Tess down.

“I’m not Bess,” said a suddenly demoralized Tess.

Tess’s tit-for-tat dialogue with her brother finally got the best of Fanny. “Come on, Tess, let’s see how good you really are.” Fanny was determined to at least give Tess a run for her money. Six tosses into the first game, Fanny had moved up the concrete patches one patch away from the finish line.

Tess, three spaces back, could see she was about to be dethroned. She would have none of it. “You cheated,” said an angry Tess.

“No, I didn’t,” said Fanny calmly.

Tess raised her hand in anger. Charlie intervened. “Tess, please stop. It’s only a game.”

“But she was cheating. She was cheating your own sister.”

“Bess, stop it, or I’ll tell Mama.”

Tess froze in her tracks. The debate was over. She turned and stared at Fanny, then picked up her Raggedy Ann from the ground, plucked out a blue glass eye and mumbled, loud enough for all to hear, “Bad girl, bad Fanny.” Then she stomped over to the entrance of her apartment, and sat silently with her arms crossed. The image of the doll with one glass eye was burned in Fanny’s mind.

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As Tess seethed in a nearby hallway, Anthony “Tino” DeAngelis—attired in torn knickers, grass-stained shirt, and muddy shoes triumphantly strutted down the street. Tino, nicknamed by his buddies because of his diminutive stature, was a homely boy with acne and a big brown birthmark under his left ear. But he possessed a surprising streak of arrogance and self-confidence. To Tino problems were merely possibilities in disguise. And money was the key to all things bright and beautiful. “I’m not gonna spend my whole life selling fruits, vegetables and fish. This is America! One day I’m gonna make lots of money and move to the Upper

East Side, where the rich folks live,” pronounced the street-savvy little man on his seventh birthday, dissociating himself from what he believed was the lot of early twentieth-century Italian immigrants.

Besides money, Tino had another love—his shiny, black Ozark brand yo-yo. He had discovered early on, size did not matter, champions got lots of free comic books, and little girls thought his through-the-leg and behind-the-back antics were cool.

Spotting the despondent Tess grouching in the hallway, he decided to cheer her up with a splendiferous feat. “Hey Tess, want to see something cool? Watch this,” said Tino, pulling a bright red yo-yo out of his pocket and bouncing it up and down with his left hand while playing *I’m Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover* on his shiny harmonica with his right.

“Wonderful,” said Tess sarcastically. “Hey, shorty, do me a favor, go twirl your stupid toys somewhere else!”

“Tessie, you’re making a big mistake,” smiled Tino, now twirling the yo-yo over his head. “Look, the champ is right here, right now.”

“Grow up,” glared Tess.

Tino took the rejection stoically. He was confident the rebuff was Tess’s loss, not his.

~

Mama Imperale walked over to Charlie’s chalk-drawn canvas. She was impressed. “Charlie, what a beautiful picture you make. I love.”

Charlie smiled, wide-eyed and innocently at Fanny. “Mama, I made it for Fanny.” He noticed something missing. More butterflies. “It’s almost finished.”

At that moment, Mama Imperale’s mind recalled a glorious, sunny vineyard in Palermo some 43 years ago. Seven-year-old Lena was bringing water to the men picking grapes in the fields. A young man with ruddy complexion

and steely dark eyes smiled as he took a water-filled tin cup from her. It was love at first sight. Lena had met what turned out to be the love of her life, husband Frank. Electricity filled the air. As Mama looked at Fanny and Charlie, she sensed that same kind of electricity. Would Fanny and Charlie one day be man and wife?

Tess's loud voice interrupted: "Charlie, when are you going to play with me? Am I supposed to wait all day while you draw that stupid picture?"

"Tessie," said Mama Imperale, "the picture no stupid, it is very beautiful. Your brother spend lot of time to make it that way. He making a present for Fanny. Charlie and Fanny being such good friends is a nice, nice thing. Who knows? Maybe one day Fanny and Charlie marry? That would make Fanny you sister."

Tess made a grotesque gesture.

"Tessie, go play with your doll," Mama directed sternly. "Charlie almost finished."

Tess stomped away, mumbling under her breath, "Later! It's always later." When she reached the doorway of her building, she again grabbed the throat of her little doll and plucked out the remaining blue glass eye. "Bad Fanny, very bad Fanny," she scolded.

*Chapter 3*

# La Familia



*(Top) Lamplighter, Papa Coscia with Mama Coscia.  
(Bottom) Thriving factory of Papa Imperale.*

Charlie was quite different from most of the other young boys in Little Italy. They were gruff, boisterous, unpolished and prone to impress each other, and the neighborhood girls. They flaunted their machismo in the New York favorites: stoop-ball, sewer-to-

sewer stick-ball, and the ever-popular game of horse—a male ritual where boys lined up in a row, bent over, butts pointed toward the street. The objective: to leap over the most horses from a running start, measured by the number of butts, of course!

By contrast, Charlie was soft-spoken, refined, courteous and sensitive to the feeling of others. He also had three clear and distinct interests: the symphony, which he discovered through Papa; the opera, which Mama loved; and Fanny, whom he adored without assistance from anyone. His favorite time of year was late spring, when wild lilies sprung up in the fields adjacent to Battery Park. Each day, on the way home from school, he'd stop and pick a single white daisy which he would present to Fanny. Each day, Fanny's eyes would twinkle a shy thank you and store the moment in her mind.

In time, Charlie was to add a fourth interest to his repertoire—one that would displease Fanny enormously—other girls, who were mesmerized by his dashing good looks and seemingly unassuming demeanor.

By the time he was twelve, Charlie was intimately familiar with most of the great composers, their subtleties of movement, mood and composition. Chopin and Rachmaninoff would ultimately become the most significant influences on his own music. And thanks to Mama, Caruso was always present on the gramophone. As Charlie would recall years later, the Imperale household was filled mostly with music and "just the proper hint of chaos."

Papa Imperale served testament to the American Dream..."In America, you be anything you want. Just work hard, do your best, everything else will take care of itself." And, so it was that he became as a clerk in Mr. Martimucci's grocery store and worked a second job unloading crates at the docks not far from Battery Park.

Before long, Papa's work ethic and Mama's skill at money management allowed the Imperales to start their own business. Mama Imperale thought the neighborhood was ready for a dress store. She taught Papa what to buy in each season. As business prospered, she suggested they design and make their own inventory. In a few years, Papa realized there was more to be made by owning a dress factory and selling to other retailers, and so the Imperale dress factory was born in a second-floor loft on Spring Street. As their business expanded and their means increased, Mama and Papa rented a larger apartment with three bedrooms on the top floor of 85 Old Broadway. Brothers Lou, Joe and Charlie slept in one bedroom, sister Tess in a second, and Mama and Papa in the "master suite," a 12' x 10' room with no closets and no bath.

They also bought a weekend farm down in South Jersey where the children would spend summers, and Mama would grow fruits and vegetables.

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While the Imperales prospered, the Coscias struggled to make ends meet.

Originally, Papa Coscia had a small fruit store on the corner of Mulberry and Spring Streets. But as the neighborhood became a hotbed of loft factories for the clothing and fabric industries, rents became so high the store couldn't survive. At the age of 52, an Italian immigrant with no particular skills, and barely able to speak English, Joe Coscia was forced to take a low-paying job as a lamplighter. Each afternoon, about three hours before sundown, he would push his cart through the streets of Lower Manhattan, climb his ladder, and light the tiny gas pilot at the top of each of 1,023 streetlights. Usually, he wouldn't finish his rounds till long after dark, so he rarely had dinner with the

family. Since he was paid a per diem allowance based on a full seven-day workweek, he rarely took a day off because he knew his already meager salary would be docked. His was a family of six: sisters, Fanny, Jenny and Mary and brothers, Jimmy, Joe and Tommy. There were a lot of mouths to feed.

Older brothers Joe and Jimmy *volunteered* to leave grammar school to help Papa. Actually, neither liked book learning. But they had aptitudes. Joe was interested in knowing how and why things worked, which led him to work at McGrory's stables on Canal Street, where he repaired carriages and carts. Every so often, he'd pilfer a few horseshoes and sell them at a discount on the West Side where nobody knew him. Except for the earnings from his side business, the rest of his salary went directly to the family kitty. Jimmy delivered milk and entertained the customers. At each delivery, he'd tell his female customers a funny story, so they would give him a larger tip. Like Joe, his earnings went to fill family needs—except for the extra tips.

Mama Coscia also worked creatively to make ends meet. There were never meal leftovers because somehow the scraps became part of the next meal. She was an excellent and inventive cook, traits Fanny never acquired. Mama also made all the older children's clothes by hand. The younger children wore hand-me-downs. The first new pair of shoes Fanny ever owned came when she was fourteen.

When Fanny was twelve, Papa became ill with emphysema and was no longer able to work. Sister Mary was also too frail to work, and Jenny had her heart set on a career in the theater. So both older sisters stayed in school while Fanny went to work in Feinstein's Notion Store on Broome Street, sorting and cutting fabric to make lampshades and tablecloths. By the time she was fourteen, Fanny had become very skilled at customer service, and was awarded a promotion answering phones and taking orders.

Each Friday Fanny would bring home her wages and give them to Mama. Unlike her brothers, she kept nothing for herself. Once she kept 25 cents to go to dinner and a show with her girlfriends although she felt guilty for a long time. This sense of parsimony continued to plague Fanny even as an adult because she'd experience pangs of guilt every time she spent extra money on herself.

Years later, she recalled those days in a poignant letter to her only son Gerard.

“Old Broadway was a wonderful time in my life. Yes, times were tight, but our house was always filled with love. Papa would sit around the table after a long day in the streets, and Mama would bring out a steaming bowl of pasta smothered in her homemade sauce. My brothers and I would eat and listen as Papa recounted his observations of the day—he had a magnificent eye for human interaction. Then we'd laugh. And, he would end every meal the same way. “As you children grow up, never forget *la Famiglia*.”