

DOMENICA DE ROSA

*The
Eternal
City*

Quercus

CHAPTER ONE

My father died on the day that my daughter was born. ‘Well, we know whose place she’s taken,’ said my Aunt Ena, sitting knitting by my bed like one of those women at the foot of the guillotine. I thought at the time that this was unfair, as if Kitty had deliberately pushed in front of her grandfather in some cosmic dinner queue. Poor little thing, she didn’t even know her grandfather. And now she never will.

At first, nobody told me that Dad had died. During the boring, agonising hours of labour (funny how pain can be extremely boring) my husband Bob was called away for a telephone call. He came back looking rather pale and shocked. ‘Where the hell have you been?’ I shouted unattractively.

‘Nowhere.’ He squeezed my hand.

‘And don’t bloody squeeze my hand.’

Even after the pure hatred of Bob, men and life in general had been replaced by the dreamlike euphoria of the birth, he still didn’t tell me. It was the next day, when I sat up in bed looking at Kitty’s little round face and wondering if she was going to have my nose, that Bob said, ‘Gaby, I’m so sorry. Enzo’s dead.’

At first I didn’t understand what he was saying. Bob hardly ever called my dad by his name. It was always ‘your father’ or, when he was pretending to be a Cockney, ‘your old man’.

‘Who?’

‘Enzo. Your dad. He had a heart attack two days ago. I’m sorry.’

I stared at him stupidly. ‘Two days ago. He died two days ago?’

‘The day Kitty was born. I’m sorry.’

I looked down at Kitty, at her wrinkled forehead and furiously shut eyes. When I first saw her olive skin and sparse black hair, I said to Bob, ‘She looks just like my dad!’ I remembered now that he didn’t answer. ‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’ I whispered.

‘I didn’t want to upset you. Just after the birth and all

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that. The nurses said to wait until you were breastfeeding properly.'

I cringed. Another thing to add to the long list of Things I Wish I Had Known Before I Gave Birth was how incredibly *difficult* breastfeeding is. It may seem amazing but even the death of a father fades into the background compared to the monstrous, stomach-clenching tension of trying to get a newborn baby to suck. Before I had Kitty, I used to think of breastfeeding as lovely and natural. A bit embarrassing on the bus or at a dinner party, maybe, but essentially an easy, casual thing. My sister Maria breastfed her two youngest children until they were practically able to go to the pub for themselves. At the time, I thought this was typical Maria – hippieish, smug exhibitionism. Now I saw it as an amazing feat, comparable to building the Great Wall of China.

I peeled back the honeycombed hospital blanket and looked at Kitty's little clenched hands. Tears stung behind my eyes. 'I didn't say goodbye. Bob, I never said goodbye to him.'

Bob sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed and put his arms round me. 'I know,' he stroked my hair, 'but it was quick. That was a good thing. Your mother went out into the garden and there he was. Lying in his rosebushes.'

‘He loved those roses.’

‘There you are, you see. It was a good way to go.’

Kitty woke up and started crying.

I had to stay in hospital for five days because Kitty had a spot at the base of her spine and nobody knew what it was. It was a strange, dislocated time. I watched mothers come and go with their new babies, feeling like the Ancient Mariner, the woman in the corner who never got to leave the hospital. Some of the mothers, on their third or fourth baby, were so casual and blasé about it all. They hardly bothered to unpack their cases and were off as soon as the baby had been washed, weighed and nappied. They breezed out, hobbling slightly, holding their older children by the hand, the fathers following behind, carrying the latest baby as if it were a piece of luggage. I watched them with shocked fascination and envy. Would I ever be so casual with Kitty that I could give her to someone else to hold *without even looking round at her*? It seemed as remote as being able to pee without crying.

On the second day, my mother came to see me. I had already had a visit from Bob’s parents, as well as Aunt Ena, nervously offering congratulations and condolences and

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telling me that Kitty looked just like Bob ('Only prettier,' his dad added kindly). But the space left by my parents seemed vast, unfathomable. My least favourite midwife, the one who looked like a vole, with watery eyes and a twitching nose, kept asking me if I'd seen 'Mum' yet. I noticed that even women with no discernible husband or partner had their mothers in close attendance. They were so involved, holding the babies, advising on feeding, dispensing chocolate and copies of *Hello!* from giant handbags. I longed for one to come up to me, take Kitty from me and tell me to have a good long sleep. But they ignored me, invisible in my corner.

But eventually my mum did come, very smart in a blue blazer and white trousers. I could sense the other women marking her down for lack of mumsy cardigans and light reading matter. She was carrying a small bunch of flowers and looked very tired. I stared at her. It was incredible, impossible, that Dad was not downstairs, parking the car ('Only an Italian can park in a space this small') or following her, hanging back with the embarrassed smile he reserved for exclusively female occasions. If I didn't say his name, perhaps it wasn't true.

'Oh, Gaby.' She smelled just the same. It couldn't be true.

‘Here’s Kitty.’ I put the baby into her arms. Kitty’s hands were opening and shutting like sea creatures. Mum hadn’t mentioned Dad.

‘Oh, Gaby,’ Mum looked at me, her eyes swimming with tears, ‘she’s just like him.’

‘It’s not true, is it?’ I whispered.

In answer, Mum put Kitty back into my arms. ‘She’s a beautiful baby. Your dad would have been so happy. He loved babies.’

And that past tense confirmed everything.

For five days, doctors were wheeled in to examine the spot at the base of Kitty’s spine. They pulled her and prodded her and twisted her but said nothing. Nightmare scenarios chased each other round in my mind. Kitty suffering from some mystery disease, fading away before she had even left hospital. One night, I walked up and down the hospital corridor for hours, holding Kitty against my shoulder, convinced that if I just kept walking she would survive. Fire extinguisher, trolley, broken drinks machine, watercolours of the Lake District: Windermere, Ullswater, Ravenglass, Coniston. Up and down, all night.

Husbands were allowed in only for a few hours in the

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morning. They brought flowers and younger children and an almost palpable sense of the world outside. Bob was always the first to arrive: I would see his red head through the frosted glass of the ward door and, for a moment, everything was all right again. He held me and comforted me and told me that Kitty would be fine. 'Look how beautiful she is. Just like me.' Once he told me a feeble joke and I laughed for hours, until I cried uncontrollably and the vole-faced midwife came over to complain about the noise. Bob even tried to help with the breastfeeding, propping Kitty on cushions to try to get the exact, scientific angle so that she could perform the miracle of 'latching on'; he fed me spoonfuls of disgusting hospital food to keep my strength up, carefully not suggesting that I call it a day and offering to run down to the shops for a vat of formula milk.

Finally, a new consultant in a smart pin-striped suit arrived to tell me that Kitty had a condition known as 'Mongolian blue spot'. 'It's quite harmless. Nobody knows what causes it. Tradition has it that it only occurs in people directly descended from Genghis Khan.' He smiled nervously.

'Genghis Khan?'

'Yes. Mongolian hordes and all that.'

I looked down at Kitty. I wished he hadn't said 'Mongolian'. Bob put a hand on my shoulder. 'Genghis Khan?' he said mildly. 'Are you sure you don't mean Imran?' Bob loves cricket.

But the consultant was already backing out of the room. His work here was done.

In the afternoon, Bob brought the brand-new car seat to the hospital. I dressed Kitty in the yellow cardigan and hat that my mum had knitted for her. Although she was a good-sized baby, she looked swamped in her 'going outside' clothes. The hat obscured most of her face and her arms flailed uselessly inside the cardigan sleeves. Her head, with its jaunty bobble, reached only half-way up the car seat. I remember thinking how tiny it was when we bought it. Now it looked massive: the baby equivalent of the *Mastermind* chair. 'Name: Kitty Duncan. Occupation: Full-time baby.'

Then we said thank you to the nurses (including Vole Woman), picked up the baby seat and left the hospital. It felt like the most terrifying moment of our lives.

Back at our flat we placed the car seat carefully in the middle of the sitting room, which was full of flowers. I sat on

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the sofa. My stitches were burning and I felt terribly tired and terribly hungry. All week I had been longing for home, with the feverish intensity of a hostage. If only I could be at home, I kept thinking, I'd be able to feed Kitty easily. I imagined myself with my feet on our Mexican oak coffee table, drinking cold white wine like someone in a colour supplement. But sitting in my very own sitting room, with all our books and posters around me and the heavy scent of the flowers in the air, I felt worse than ever. It was a beautiful April day and the window was open, bringing sounds of reggae music and laughter from the street outside. The cherry tree in our neighbour's garden was covered with shocking-pink blossom. A long way away, I could hear a police car wailing. London in springtime. It is just that I didn't fit into the scene. I was a leaking, overweight woman with a baby in my arms. I belonged to a different house, one with stair gates and baby alarms and plastic toys in the hall.

Kitty started to cry. Bob picked her up. 'Do you want to try feeding her?' he said doubtfully.

I tilted Kitty's head towards my nipple and tried not to wince as she took it into her mouth. That's the other thing they don't tell you: it hurts like buggery.

Bob brought me a cup of tea, but I was too scared to drink it in case I spilt some on Kitty's head. My mouth felt like paper, beyond thirst, as if it had never been wet in my life. Kitty sucked and sucked, but I was sure she was getting nothing. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

The doorbell rang, making us both jump. Bob went to answer it. I was frantically drying my eyes on a cushion when he came back into the room with my sister Anna.

She was dressed all in black. Even in my bemused, tearful, strung-out state I wondered where on earth she could have bought black *earrings*. Long jangly jet ones, like those worn by Victorian widows. She wore a black lace blouse, long black skirt, black tights and black high-heeled shoes. I was sure that if she could have found a lace mantilla, she would have been wearing one.

'That baby's not latched on,' said Anna. She has always been good at saying the right thing.

I started to cry again. Kitty let go of my nipple and joined in, little newborn wails that nevertheless expanded to fill the room. Anna took her from me with a practised-mother swoop. Pressed against her large black-lace bosom, Kitty abruptly stopped crying.

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‘How are you finding the breastfeeding?’ Anna asked.

‘A bit . . . you know . . . uncomfortable.’

‘Keep at it,’ she told me sternly. ‘Breast is best.’ I could feel her putting it in capitals. The Breast. It seemed to loom over my life like one of those alien life-forms in science-fiction films. *Invasion of the Breast*.

Anna sat down next to me. Kitty slept traitorously in her arms.

‘I’ll make a cup of tea,’ said Bob. Anna makes him nervous.

Anna looked at me with a kind of sorrowful intensity that I always find unnerving. ‘It’s about the funeral,’ she said.

Dad’s funeral was the next day. In one part of my mind I knew this; in another it seemed immeasurably far away. Dad was dead and his funeral was tomorrow, but, compared to this room and Kitty and the stupefying panic of motherhood, it felt unreal, as if it were happening to someone else’s family.

‘Are you bringing Kitty?’ asked Anna.

‘Yes,’ I said defiantly. As I was her only source of food at present, where I went Kitty went. And I wanted to be there. Or, rather, there was nothing in the world I wanted to do less, but I had to be there.

Amazingly, Anna approved. 'I'm sure it's what Dad would have wanted,' she said kindly. 'He loved babies.'

I wanted to say many things. I wanted to say, 'How come everyone knows what Dad would have wanted?' I wanted to say, 'Please stop telling me how much Dad loved babies when he is never going to see mine.' I wanted to say, 'It doesn't matter what Dad would have wanted because he isn't going to be there. He is dead.' But I said nothing.

'I'm doing a reading,' Anna continued. 'St Paul, of course.' She said it as if he were a personal friend. 'Do you want to do one?'

'No, thanks.'

'Maria's doing a bidding prayer. She's writing it herself.' Briefly, she raised her eyes heavenwards. We both knew that the prayer would contain numerous references to Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the circle of life. 'Marco and Sergio have written a song.' They are Anna's sons, usually to be found plugged into iPhones. It would be amazing to see them without wires attached. 'What do you want to do?' prompted Anna.

'Do?' I echoed stupidly.

'At the funeral.'

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‘Nothing.’ The dreary tears started again.

‘You must do something. Why don’t you write a little poem about Daddy?’

‘For Christ’s sake, I’m not one of your fourth-formers.’ Anna is, of course, a teacher.

I had made a big mistake. I had mentioned the C-word. I had called on another of Anna’s closest friends. Anna looked as if she were going to reply, perhaps to remind me that it was for Christ’s sake, after all, but mercifully she said nothing. Instead, she patted me, rather clumsily, on the shoulder. ‘Don’t cry, Gaby. I understand. It’s your hormones.’

I cried even harder, wanting to say, ‘It’s not my hormones, it’s because my father’s dead.’ Why did everyone blame my hormones for everything? ‘We’ve just had another weepy day,’ the nurses at the hospital would say comfortably to Bob. ‘It’s nothing to worry about, just hormones.’ And if I did have these things racing around inside me, making me cry all the time, wasn’t that something to worry about? My father was dead, I couldn’t feed my baby, my sister kept droning on about funerals – wasn’t that something to cry about?

Anna kept patting my shoulder with firm downward movements, as if she were making bread. ‘Don’t cry,’ she

said. 'It'll curdle your milk.' And then I howled in earnest and Kitty joined in. Bob came in to find the room full of screaming women. To his credit, he didn't turn tail and run. Instead, he took Kitty out of Anna's arms. She stopped crying immediately. 'Gaby's tired,' he said. 'Perhaps you'd better discuss this another time.'

Anna is five years older than me. Now it seems like nothing (except when I see her dance), but when we were younger it was a huge gap. By the time I arrived in secondary school, Anna was in the fifth year, wearing make-up and talking about 'global capitalism'. Maria is two years younger than Anna and three years older than me. She is in the middle, but when we were children she was always closer to Anna. They shared a bedroom while I had the tiny boxroom to myself. They used to read *Smash Hits* and go to discos when I was still keen on being a Brownie. By the time I got to the Sacred Heart comprehensive, I was already known as 'Anna de Angelis's sister'.

Not that this was such a bad thing. Anna was a big star at school. Clever, sporty, great at taking on those thankless jobs like 'pupil representative' and 'chair of the debating

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society'. She was always organising things: petitions against abortion, collections for starving children in Africa, sponsored walks in aid of CAFOD. The teachers, particularly the nuns, adored her.

I was a disappointment – I grasped that immediately. Oh, I was clever enough, though mostly in subjects like maths and science, which were subtly considered (by my parents, at least) to be inferior to English and history. It was just that I lacked Anna's sense of showmanship. I was slow to put up my hand in class or in assembly. I never volunteered to do the reading at mass. I hated debating and hid at the back of the chorus in school plays.

Anna never had any such qualms. She was the star of the debating society, a mesmerising Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, a rather disturbing Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. No feast day was complete without the sound of her clear, calm voice reading the bidding prayers. I will always remember once, after I had stumbled through an obligatory reading at assembly, one of the nuns saying, 'Sure and He broke the mould after He made Anna.' At the time I dismissed it as one of those gnostic nuns' remarks that mean nothing. It was only afterwards that I thought about it and understood

that they meant Anna was the original and best; Maria and I were only inferior versions of her. The standard in our family was going down: from Anna down to Maria and hitting rock bottom with me.

Anna was always sure to go to university and do great things in the world. 'I can see her as the first Catholic prime minister,' said Sister Anthony mistily, as Anna gave the vote of thanks at her leavers' dinner. There was no doubt that she would go far.

And, at first, she did. Anna got straight As at A level and went to Cambridge to read English. All was going according to plan: she bulldozed her way on to a variety of committees and it seemed it was only a matter of time before she would appear on *Question Time*, arguing passionately against the morning-after pill. But then she fell in love.

She announced it with typical Anna confidence. 'I've met the man I'm going to marry,' she told us, when she arrived home for the first long summer vacation. In fact, she announced it in the car on the way home from the station. I was only along for the ride (I was in my loafing-around stage: too young to go into town on my own, old enough to be bored by everything else) so I said nothing. Married, I was

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thinking. Leaving home, going to university, getting married. Isn't something missing here? Like the brilliant career?

'That's lovely, darling,' said my mother, after a pause. 'What's his name?'

'David,' said Anna. 'David Blackstock. I met him at the Catholic Society.'

I don't know why, but this information depressed us. Dad, trying hard, asked, 'What is he reading?'

'Philosophy,' said Anna unanswerably. 'After university, he wants to do VSO and teach in Africa.'

We all murmured appreciatively. Dad misjudged the turning into our drive and knocked off the Lancia's wing mirror.

When we finally met David, they were already secretly engaged, Anna wearing the ring on a chain round her neck, next to her crucifix. David was nice: we all liked him. He was a dark, intense-looking Catholic boy from Manchester. He wore John Lennon glasses and thought that Jesus was the first socialist. He impressed me by being knowledgeable about current music (Anna considered the Gregorian chant dangerously modern) and excitingly reckless on the Palace Pier dodgems. My parents liked him too. He talked to my

dad about philosophy and economics and to my mum about feminist historians. He even helped push Dad's car when it refused to start in the morning (although he fell over and broke his glasses in the process). Why, then, did it seem such a bombshell when Anna announced their engagement. Coming down late one night to get a glass of water, I overheard my parents saying things like 'Let's be sensible, it may not last,' and 'I never thought we'd have this problem with Anna, the other two maybe' (thanks a bunch, Mum). Why was it such a disaster that Anna was marrying a good Catholic boy with whom she was manifestly in love?

I think it was just that they'd had such high hopes for her. She was marrying a nice boy and would no doubt start a nice Catholic family. It was unlikely that she would become prime minister. Anna married David straight after graduation, wearing the biggest, whitest dress seen in Lewes since the visit of Elizabeth I, some four hundred years earlier. There was no more talk of VSO or Africa. David and Anna settled in London, and Anna did a PGCE and got a job teaching English at the local comprehensive. She liked her work and was good at it, becoming head of department in three years. At about the same time, she had her first child, Marco. My parents were

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happy: they were proud of her, they liked David, they adored their first male grandchild, but there was still a lingering sense that it wasn't what they had expected for Anna, 'the clever one'.

Anna didn't seem unhappy, though. She achieved at motherhood in the same way that she had achieved at everything else in her life. Marco was the brightest, most stimulated baby in existence. When I went to visit Anna in her new house in Forest Hill (magnetic letters on the fridge, climbing frame in the back garden) she drove me mad by continually stopping what she was saying to me to answer one of Marco's countless questions. 'Yes, Marco, Auntie Gaby's my little sister. How can she be my little sister when she's all grown-up? Well, to me she'll always be my little sister. Just like Sergio will always be your little brother.'

Yes, Sergio followed Marco after two years. The perfect Catholic gap. Close enough that they might not be using contraception, but not so close that David looked like a sex maniac. Anna took the boys to church on Sunday, one child holding her hand sweetly, the other burbling in a pushchair. They were the ideal family.

Which would have been fine: the children *were* sweet,

Anna was a good mother, she and David *did* have a strong marriage. If only she could have been content with that. But, no, it was not enough that she and David were walking in the light of the Lord: we all had to join her in the heavenly spotlight. My dad was urged to renew his baptismal vows. My mother, who is not a Catholic, faced an almost daily onslaught of pamphlets and newsletters inviting her to ‘Come and See. Join in the Catholic Journey of Faith.’ ‘Will Grandma go to heaven even if she’s not a Catholic?’ asked Marco, aged five.

‘Only if she’s very good,’ said Anna darkly.

But it was Maria and I who suffered most. Since she had got pregnant at nineteen and divorced at twenty-one, Maria was already well on the way to fallen-womanhood. In fact, I suggested she changed her name to Maria Magdalene and had done with it. Funnily enough, though, it was when Maria remarried and happily started a new family that Anna really got on her case. Maria’s second marriage, to Ray, involved a brief visit to the register office followed by a picnic on the South Downs where Maria, in an embroidered gypsy dress, talked about pantheism and stone-age fertility rites. Anna, rigid in a blue suit, sat on a hillock with an untouched mug

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of champagne beside her. I knew from her set, stony face that she was inwardly reciting the rosary. Could this really be counted as a marriage? Later, when Maria had Mosaic and Kyle, she did not have them baptised but invited us to their Native American naming ceremony. Anna refused to come, adding threateningly that she would pray for them. You could tell that, in Anna's mind, an education at various Montessori and Steiner schools would never make up for not chanting the Our Father and taking part in May processions.

With me, Anna's Christian zeal took the form of worrying about my morals. I had scarcely been at university a week when I received a letter from her. 'Dear Gaby,' it began, 'I hope you are enjoying university and that you are not too tired after freshers' week!!' The exclamation marks were meant to show that she knew what it was like: she had been to university and she understood the temptation of spotty youths studying environmental science. She was human but she knew her duty, which was to warn me. The letter went on: 'I know some of your friends will be sleeping with their boyfriends but I do urge you not to do the same. Save yourself for your husband.' I remember throwing the letter into the bin, then taking it

out and tearing it into very small pieces. Saving myself for my husband indeed! If her behaviour with Stuart Wilkins was anything to go by, I was pretty sure *she* hadn't. How dared she lecture me?

Whenever I had a new boyfriend, Anna would sigh deeply and say she hoped 'this one is going to last'. But it was when I fell in love and got married that Anna's disapproval reached new heights. Bob and I even got married in a Catholic church but, for Anna, the Church's blessing could hardly have been more painful if it had been a black mass. Not only was Bob not a Catholic, he was also, according to Anna, 'a man without a spiritual connection.' Bob had scandalised her by saying cheerfully that he had been raised as an Anglican but he 'didn't mind' if the wedding was in a Catholic church because 'They're all the same, really, aren't they?' Anna was horrified. She would have preferred a Muslim or a Jew or even a downright atheist (lots of scope for conversion), anyone rather than this smiling heathen who just 'didn't mind'. He hadn't even got the necessary conviction to be anti-Catholic. He simply didn't care very much either way.

To be fair to Bob, there was no way, in Anna's eyes, that

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he could ever live up to my previous boyfriend, Jonathan. He had been intelligent, good-looking, spiritual and committed. He was Anna's ideal man.

He is a priest.