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## *Note to the Reader from Author*

Some aspects of this book may appear denigrating to the whole of Sicilian culture and the Sicilian people. Such is definitely not the case. As in every culture on earth, there is a generous mixture of good and bad, and the chronicling of my experiences in Sicily bear this out. It must be remembered that this book was written through a lens of captivity, wherein my son was stolen from me and where the whole of the Italian legal system was arrayed against me. The understandable stress of living in a foreign country and being portrayed as an “uninterested” mother contributed greatly to the way I saw both my situation in particular and Sicily in general. Had I remained there as a vacationing tourist or even an expat\* with a good home life, this book would never have been written. So, I ask the reader to bear with me, in grace, and perhaps consider if my feelings, though graphic, were also understandable.

On the up side, much of Sicilian culture was and is a blessing on my life. While there, I made some wonderful Sicilian friends, some of whom remain friends today. I rave about the cuisine (with the exception of cow spleen sandwiches-see Chapter 7) and the country’s incredible beauty and rich history. Having become somewhat fluent in Italian while there, I still speak that lovely language when the opportunity arises. And, no mention of the country would be complete without touching on the people themselves. Sicilians, for all their faults, are the most wildly enthusiastic people I’ve ever met. They carelessly embrace each day as it comes, and their boundless optimism is contagious.

With all my heart, I thank them for what they have taught me.

*Katherine (Katie) Sapienza*

\* Short for expatriate; a person who resides in another country other than the one in which he or she grew up in or has legal residency in.

**Publisher Note:** Some names in this book have been changed out of respect for the privacy of certain individuals involved. The story itself is factual and true in every sense.

# Prologue

*Chi nasconde quel che fa,  
Vuol dire che male fa.*  
**Who hides what he is doing,  
means he is doing something bad.**

*I*t would be nice if, like that old cliché, life really was like a highway—a broad, well-paved avenue flatlining to a distant horizon. It is instead a seemingly untended crust of broken asphalt, fraught with potholes, agonizingly narrow at spots, clogged with fellow travelers who haven't got a clue where they're headed but want to get there in a hurry. Finally, it is a roadway marred with flashing light detours that force the vehicle of the soul onto some shadowed, tufted-over jeep trail whose terminus may be a forgotten emotional backwater.

No young mother wakes up one fine morning and thinks, *Today my child will cave in to peer pressure and try drugs for the first time or tonight, after my daughter's prom, she will be fatally struck by a drunk driver.* Nor does she awake thinking, *This is the last day for many years that I'll be able to kiss my son's face, stroke his hair, or feel his nearness. This is the day he'll be torn from my side without my notice, that he'll be removed to a foreign country, told his mother is a bad person, and held against his will by those claiming to love him. This is the day he'll be kidnapped.*

For me, it was a time of many other things as well: the beginning of walking through an empty house haunted by the quiet, touching his toys, going to sleep at night hugging his clothes. Oh, and the tears, always the tears. Coming unbidden at every inconvenient moment of every hellish day, this protracted grief became

## *Stolen From My Arms*

prison bars through which I saw the world. It was the catalyst for a long, waking nightmare, of unyielding anguish and finally of the unreasoning rage of a momma bear deprived of her cub.

This momma would fight. Had I known beforehand just how long the battle would go on or how many emotional breakdowns I'd have to experience, I wonder if I could have held to my sanity. Just the thought of facing so many looming obstacles, while uncertain of the outcome, could have knocked the fight out of me. The detour down this dark, weed-strewn road led to places I hope never to see again. And to one that changed my life.

How can a person prepare herself for the unthinkable? During the Holocaust, when the deportation of European Jews to the death camps was in full swing, when the horrors of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka were beginning to be known to their prospective victims, even then many refused to believe. For more than a millennium, Europe hosted a small but strong Jewish community. Often derision, pogroms, and slander would come with the territory. But the Jews could no more contemplate their planned eradication than they could believe the moon would be whisked from the night sky. As a group, they were an integral part of the European scene, and as such, were needed. Their philosophy of bending in the strong winds of change instead of being broken by them had kept their communities intact through war and societal abuse. They just could not fathom such a mass atrocity as their own intricately planned extermination. "We have always suffered persecution," they said, "and this will pass, as all the other times. Things will return as they once were."

Even when shuttled into cattle cars and brutalized by sadistic guards, many refused to look reality square in the face. It was not that they were naïve; it was simply that such a monstrous plan directed at them was beyond the scope of anything they—or indeed the civilized world—had ever dealt with. There were simply no parallels to it in their collective experience.

As a mother whose child is abducted, you find yourself thinking over and over—*This isn't happening, not really. This is the stuff*

## *Prologue*

*of Grade B movies or trashy novels. At the very least it should be happening to someone else.* You keep waiting for the alarm clock to go off so you can open your eyes and breathe an exhausted, heartfelt prayer of thanks that it was only a horrific dream. But you don't waken. There's no merciful escape for even a moment, and with every tick of the clock, you're left with that unrelenting fear that balls its fist in your stomach. It reminds you this is life, baby, and just like what the Bard said, you're just an actor playing out your part, completely at the mercy of another's script. Everything is outside your control.

Yet, before the first act starts, before the first incident sets off the unraveling of your well-ordered world, that first twenty-four hour span kicks it off and leaves it cemented in your mind forever . . . that first day . . .