

# A LETTER FROM LANCASTER COUNTY

Kate Lloyd

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## **A LETTER FROM LANCASTER COUNTY**

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## Prologue

Silvia Donato's hand shook as she put her pen's tip to the stationery. She hesitated, but then prodded herself no matter how much her fingers ached. This was her last chance to repair much of what had gone wrong. Before it was too late.

Dearest Angela and Rose,

Please visit me. This invitation may sound crazy. After so many years, I wouldn't blame you if you couldn't care less about your aunt. But I'm getting older, and how I regret not asking you sooner, as well as the tension between your mother and me that separated us for so long.

How can I entice you to travel clear across the country? For one thing, I still live in your grandparents' house where your mother grew up. You might wish to take a memento home with you. Anything you like. Lancaster County is truly magnificent. To my way of thinking, autumn is its finest season. Please come.

Fondly,  
Aunt Silvia

Angela

My younger sister and I trailed our cousin Phyllis across the slate path toward Aunt Silvia's house. I inhaled Lancaster County's earthy farmland aromas and a trace of smoke wafting through a wooded area, up from the valley below. Horses clip-clopping in the distance sounded like muted steeple bells from another century.

A kaleidoscope of expectations swirled through my chest. I felt as if I were a little girl opening a present, discovering Santa had delivered exactly what I'd asked for.

But then I glanced over my shoulder and saw Rose lugging her duffel bag like the hunchback of Notre Dame—acting like a five-year-old, when in fact she was thirty-six. Was she limping? This morning, she'd made a last-minute trip to a restroom near our gate and then sprinted onto the plane and lobbed her bag into an overhead bin just before the flight attendant closed the door. I had nearly hastened back down the jet bridge, convinced she wouldn't make it and I'd be on my own.

A temporary lapse in judgment, she'd labeled it—her excuse for all her wild stunts. Like finding her boyfriends in bars. They could be serial killers, for all she knew. Not that I didn't have my own foibles. But asking her to come on this trip could have been a mistake.

Several yards from the front door, Phyllis brought our lopsided trio to an abrupt halt to dig through her purse for a key, giving Rose time to catch up. She dropped her bag and lifted her chin to survey the two-story red structure, once our grandparents' residence. Her dark bangs slanted across one eye. "Was the house always this color?"

"Yes." Elation rang in my voice because I was jazzed to be here. Finally. "Remember Mom's photo?" When she was still alive, our mother kept that photo in her desk drawer, out of Dad's sight.

Rose squinted at the clapboard siding. "It reminds me of a caboose. You'd never see a house that bright in Seattle."

Heat surged up my neck. "Rose, where are your manners?" Her scowl told me I sounded like Mom, her former nemesis.

She glanced at Phyllis. "Sorry, cuz, I didn't mean to be disrespectful." Rose and I hadn't set eyes on Phyllis for twenty years, and my sister was already calling her a pet name.

Phyllis spoke in run-on sentences. "Not a problem, if I had my way Ma would sell this dinosaur and move into assisted living. Sorry she's not here I told Ma what time I was picking you up at the airport." Her mousy brown hair hung limply around her small face, and her pinched features hinted of frustration as she mounted the one step.

When Phyllis jiggled the key into the lock, an ocean of throaty barking erupted. She tugged the door open and a black mongrel the size of a Saint Bernard barged out.

Rose, usually brave—reckless was a better description—dropped her bag and tucked her hands under her chin. "Does it bite?"

"Only an occasional FedEx driver. Pay no attention to Rex, he's all show although the postal carrier refuses to set foot on the property. If Ma's mail won't fit in the box down by the road it doesn't get delivered." She kneed the massive dog out of her way and entered the house.

With hackles raised, Rex sniffed my pant leg. I hoped he really was a pussycat behind his bravado. I took a chance and extended a palm to the dog's graying muzzle. He gave my fingers a cursory sniff before trotting into the house, clearing an avenue for me to follow Phyllis.

For the first time in two decades I crossed the threshold of the family home. Aunt Silvia, Mom's younger sister, had kept our grandparents' well-worn furniture exactly as it was. The same oval,

braided rug spread across the hardwood floor to the rock fireplace. The low-beamed ceiling hung above paned windows framed by walnut-stained timber, and the couch dissected the room, creating a dining area on the other side.

I sniffed the air. “Something smells good. Baking squash?”

“Good Lord, Ma left the oven on?” Phyllis loped past the dining table and into the kitchen, with Rex scrambling after her, barking. “Hush!” she yelled at the dog, and he fell silent.

Through the doorway I saw Phyllis yank open the oven, peer at something inside, and then slam the oven door before turning a knob. She raised her hands above her head and shook them, as if imploring the Almighty. Then her arms flopped to her sides and she returned to the living area.

“Sorry ’bout that I swear Ma’s going to burn this house down.” She expelled a lengthy breath. “Well, guess we should get you two settled.”

“I know where I want to sleep.” I guided my wheeled suitcase through the living area and down the hall to the back bedroom, as if drawn by a magnet. There was the canopy bed Mom used as a girl, and where Rose and I slept on our few childhood visits with Mom. My mind hadn’t exaggerated how high the four-poster stood. I needed to stretch on tiptoes to sit on the patchwork quilt, and when I did the mattress squished down comfortably like a feather pillow.

Rose poked her head in. “Where should I go?”

I knew from experience, when Rose was miserable the whole world suffered. I said, “You can have this room, if you want it.” But I sent her mental images of luxuriating in another bedroom; I didn’t want to give up my Shangri-La.

“Nope, you get first dibs. Coming to Pennsylvania is your gig.”

Hoping to release the tension building in my temples, I yanked my shoulder-length hair out of the scrunchie. “Don’t say that, Rosie. We’re in this boat together.”

She didn’t reply, as if our dinghy had already sunk.

Phyllis appeared at Rose’s elbow. “Ma uses the bedroom across the hall for sewing and ironing, but there’s another one right above this.”

“I remember. The itty-bitty one.” Rose’s face turned glum, but she never looked bad. Her black brows and Venus de Milo mouth gave her the appearance of a young, brown-eyed Elizabeth Taylor. My opposite in every way.

While she and Phyllis climbed the wooden staircase, I kicked off my loafers, dangled my feet over the side of the bed, and admired the wallpaper—lilac blossoms floating against creamy beige—Mom might have picked out as a girl. At my feet spread the hooked rug—a floral motif—where she must have played with dolls.

If she liked dolls. I knew little about her childhood; she rarely spoke about it. I had countless questions, one reason I’d come to see Aunt Silvia. Although my husband, Frederick, a master at cross-examining witnesses, had warned me I might not like what I found. Before hiring a private detective to shadow a client’s spouse, he often cautioned them, “If you can’t live with the worst-case scenario, sometimes it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.”

Overhead, floorboards creaked and complained. Hearing Rose’s muffled voice sent a thud of sadness through my chest. My only sibling had disliked me since we were teenagers. Boom, one day my sweet giggly little sister metamorphosed into an ogre. An onset of raging hormones? Or had she been snubbed at school by the queen bee? And I didn’t think she had a boyfriend to break her heart

until at least college. In any case, I would have done anything to repair our tug-of-war relationship, including making this trip together.

Minutes later, Rose plodded into the room and landed on the rocking chair by the lace-curtained window. She was wearing skinny jeans, riding low on her hips, and she'd changed from her turtleneck into a V-neck sweater, a provocative look I thought was inappropriate here in the land of the Amish.

"My bedroom's cozy," she said, which I assumed meant cramped.

"You'd better sleep here, Rosie." I slid off the bed and gave it a pat. "I insist. I was acting selfishly. You deserve to enjoy yourself too."

"Nah, that's okay. I'll get used to it. The bed upstairs is too small for you."

I clenched my teeth, flattened my lips.

"I don't mean you're big, sis. Just four inches taller than I am."

I let Rose's comment go. If I agreed or disagreed, she'd be all over me like a hornet.

She rocked back and forth, the toes of her suede boots tapping the floor. "Really, the whole room is made for a shrimp like me." She was trying to gloss over her innuendo that I'd grown porky. But she was right. I'd gained over twenty pounds since giving birth years ago: ten per child, and several more consoling myself with food after Frederick informed me he was getting a vasectomy, as if he were going to do nothing more life-shattering than remove an inconvenient mole.

"Pay no attention to me" she said, breaking into my reflections. "I'm acting cranky."

Phyllis leaned through the doorway. She was my age, thirty-nine; the skin at the corners of her eyes was accumulating the same pesky crow's feet as mine. "I've got to get back to work." She frowned at her wristwatch. "Where could Ma be?"

"We can entertain ourselves," I said. "She's so nice to have us."

"Rose sprang to her feet with agility. "Yeah, nice." In her heeled boots she stood almost my height.

"In her letter, Aunt Silvia seemed determined that we visit." I hoped our aunt hadn't been overly gracious when she'd written us. I couldn't really remember what she was like, but Dad said Aunt Silvia and Mom hadn't gotten along. Rose thought their dispute had to do with a man, her answer to everything.

"Yep, Ma's the best," Phyllis said without conviction. "But call me if anything unusual arises, okay? My number's by the phone."

Rose and I followed her out the front door. Afternoon salmon-colored sunlight stippled the amber and russet-colored leaves in the wooded hillside above the home. I was relieved when Rex trotted around the side of the house—in case the mailman had pegged the dog right.

"Sorry gotta run," Phyllis said. "Let's get together before you leave." She hustled to her SUV as if she couldn't wait to make her exit. A moment later, her vehicle lurched over the gravel driveway, stopped at the road to allow a horse and buggy to pass, and then sped away.

I was tempted to dash down to the road to grab a look at the buggy, but it was too late. As we were chauffeured here from the Philadelphia Airport, I'd seen many horse and buggies, but Phyllis kept her SUV aimed straight ahead, skimming by them without interest.

Meandering back to the house, I inhaled to my fullest. The late-autumn breeze—a potpourri of moist soil, drying corn husks, and fallen leaves—was as fragrant as ripening grapes at a vineyard.

An automobile approached from the other direction. Then an aged, beige-metallic Buick ground into the drive and stopped in front of the weathered two-car garage that looked as though it hadn't been opened for years. My feet skipped across the path when I spied Aunt Silvia's face through the Buick's window. She didn't resemble our mother, who'd been fair-skinned and blonde like me. Silvia's salt-and-pepper hair, once espresso-brown like Rose's and long enough to wear in a bun, was lopped to about three inches.

"Hello, dear ones." Silvia got out. "I'm sorry. I meant to be home earlier." Standing several inches shorter than I did, she clasped me in a tight embrace; I felt more bones than flesh. As she hugged Rose, Silvia's eyes moistened behind her tortoiseshell glasses. She patted under them with her fingertips. "Finally, I'll get to know Juliana's daughters, all grown up."

When I heard Mom's name, my breath froze in my throat. After a year, I thought my mourning period was over, but a familiar aching tightened my chest like goliath hands gripping my ribs. Her death remained a mystery, a slow decline that had lasted a couple of decades. Each specialist gave a different perspective: arthritis, MS, lupus, fibromyalgia. Then heart failure.

Silvia reached into the car to retrieve a small paper bag and tucked it in her purse, out of sight. "I had several errands..."

"That's okay," I said. "We're just happy to be here." At least, I was.

Her mid-calf skirt swaying, Silvia moved around the car and opened the trunk to reveal two full grocery bags. Rose—always a step ahead of me—scooped up the larger one and I took the other.

Halfway to the house, Silvia slowed us to a stop to watch five swallows gliding in flamboyant arcs, then land on the sloped roof. Warmth from the lingering sun radiated off the shingles and transformed the house's siding to rusty-orange. Fortunately, Rose made no snide comments.

"This old place sat empty for over a year after my mother, your Grandma Luisa, passed away," Silvia said.

"I remember." I rearranged the bag in my arms. "When no one wanted it, Mom toyed with the idea of using it as a vacation home."

Rose sneered. "Nah. Father would have nixed that idea in a split second."

"He never had much use for this house," Silvia agreed.

"He calls it a claustrophobic rat's nest," Rose said, and Silvia's beautifully creased face broke into a smile.

"I don't doubt it. He called my mother—your Grandma Luisa—Loose Wheel."

Rose chuckled, and I couldn't help joining in. "I'm glad you moved here," I said. "That it didn't leave the family forever."

"It seemed natural when I became single again." Silvia was a widow, but Mom told us Silvia and her husband, Frank, had been separated when he died. Apparently he was a womanizer who'd propositioned Mom at his own wedding.

Rex bounded out of the woods, panting and flagging his tail. "Where have you been?" Silvia asked him. "In the neighbor's chicken coop again?" As though they'd had this one-sided conversation before. Then she led us around the side of the house and opened the glass-paned kitchen door. Rose and I placed the bags on a yellow Formica table in the center of the room.

With the dog milling at her feet, Silvia pulled out cheeses and meats wrapped in white paper and a loaf of hard-crust bread. She tugged an apron over her head and cinched the strings around her



slender waist. I could tell she'd been digging in the garden, doing chores that had chipped her blunt nails and left a slight discoloration on her fingertips—unlike our mother, who'd insisted on weekly manicures and a housekeeper who kept the family home looking like a page from *House Beautiful*. Not that I blamed Mom; she always seemed fatigued, on the verge of a yawn.

“How was your flight, girls?”

“It took forever,” Rose said.

I felt pent-up ire lifting my shoulders. “It wasn't so bad. My frequent-flyer miles upgraded us to first class.” I bet it was the only time Rose had sat in the first cabin. “We got a nice chance to chat in the Red Carpet Room in Chicago.”

“If you say so.”

Had I talked too much during the layover and flight? I chattered on like a parrot sometimes, especially when nervous, which Rose made me because she analyzed every word, storing them away for future ammunition.

“Hey, Aunt Silvia,” Rose said. “Want me to set the table?”

“Yes, please.” Silvia pointed to a wall cabinet crammed with mismatched china. “Use whatever plates you like. The cutlery's in that drawer and the napkins are in the sideboard in the dining area.”

Using methodical movements, Silvia heated oil and butter in the skillet before unwrapping boneless chicken breasts and dredging them through salted flour. As she spoke of her parents—what accomplished chefs they'd been thanks to their Italian roots—I let my vision drift around the room and was transported back to my childhood visits, times of contentment. The same brass light fixture that shined on Grandma Luisa Moretti's shoulders as her plump belly pressed against the sink cast a golden glow. Copper and stainless steel pans and a collection of ladles hung from the rack above the chipped white enamel stove. The air was thick and touchable. The aroma of sweet garlic and basil filled my nostrils. On a wall a framed embroidery proclaimed *Dopo il brutto viene il bello*. Years ago, Mom told me it had something to do with the weather turning beautiful after a storm in Italian.

Thirty minutes later, Silvia poured boiling pasta into a strainer. A cloud of steam burst up, floating to the windowpanes.

“This kitchen smells divine,” I said, my mouth watering.

She drizzled olive oil and balsamic vinegar over lettuce leaves, basil, and diced tomatoes and then handed the wooden bowl to me. “Go have a seat, girls,” she said, handing me the salad. “I'm almost finished.”

I set the bowl on the oval table in the dining area and then straightened the flatware Rose had placed on either side of three blue-and-white plates. The knives faced out—I flipped them over. And the water glasses stood on the wrong side—I repositioned them. Had she forgotten everything Mom taught us?

Rose noticed me; her eyes bulged. “Are we getting compulsively neat in our old age?” Any chance to remind me I was older than she was, and that I fussed too much.

I eased down onto the chair facing the living area. To keep my hands busy, I rotated my wedding band in the white groove on my ring finger. How startling: I hadn't thought about Tiffany, my fourteen-year-old daughter, or my eleven-year-old son, Daniel, for hours. They usually flashed like neon lights in the electrical current streaming through my brain. And Frederick? I must have been more tired than I realized. I could barely visualize what he looked like.

"I guess I should call home," I said. "No, never mind, my cell phone battery's dead. I was so worried about leaving reminder notes for the kids this morning, I forgot my charger." I scanned the room for a telephone and spotted a black model out of the fifties on a side table by the fireplace. "I could use Silvia's."

"Don't bother." Rose parked herself on the chair across from me. "It's three hours earlier in Seattle. Stop worrying. They're fine."

What did she know about raising a family? She was childless and doted over her Cairn terrier as though it were a baby; she was paying a dog sitter forty dollars a day to come to her house to feed and coddle it.

I checked the carriage clock resting on the mantel. "Six p.m. Three in Seattle. I guess you're right, Rosie. The kids are getting out of school and going to their friends' houses. I wonder what Frederick's up to."

"While the cat's away?" Rose raised her sculpted brows as if she knew the inside scoop on Frederick's supposed clandestine activities.

"Don't make insinuations without proper evidence," I said, quoting my husband. "He's on the phone or with clients. Sitting at Daddy's old desk." But his office, once our father's, with its new, plush carpet, cushy leather couch, and gas fireplace, would be a cozy nest for a rendezvous. Only last week, when entering Frederick's office unannounced, I'd found his new paralegal, Stephanie, a voluptuous twentysomething, reading his computer screen over his shoulder. But when she noticed me she straightened her spine. Spouting legal jargon, she'd fled the room.

"You wouldn't want to mess with Freddie Strick," Rose told Silvia as our aunt carried a platter of browned and succulent chicken to the table. "He's a pit bull in the courtroom. Famous for winning humongous divorce settlements." Rose bopped into the kitchen for the bowl of squash and then sat down again.

"Frederick," I said. "He hates to be called Freddie. And you make him sound awful." Not that he didn't enjoy pinning his opponent's shoulder to the mat. A favorable verdict seemed to satisfy him more than helicopter skiing in the Rockies, scuba diving the Great Barrier Reef, or even making love.

"I doubt he'd mind being called aggressive." Rose reached for the water pitcher and filled her glass. "The truth is, I'd hire him myself if I had someone to sue." She gulped a mouthful and found a chunk of ice to crunch into. "That's one advantage of staying single."

"You're trying to convince us you're unmarried by choice?"

"I'd rather be single than stuck in a dead-end marriage."

My hands clenched. Every molecule within me wanted to unleash my tongue and hurl caustic words, but I figured Rose probably wished to be married as much as any woman her age. I should show her compassion.

Thank goodness Silvia paid no heed to our banter. She served the meal, passing Rose and me plates mounded with chicken, noodles, and squash. Rex wandered into the room, plopped down at Silvia's feet, and bellowed out a moan.

My mouth salivated. "That's way too much." I unfolded my napkin, flattened it on my lap atop my black Chico's knit travel slacks. "I'm sort of on a diet."

"Which one this time?" Rose asked.

“Low carbs.” I slathered butter over my squash. “I’ll start again tomorrow.”

She snickered. “I’ve heard that one before.”

“So? We’re not all size six petite like you.”

“Girls, shall we thank the Lord before we eat?” Silvia bowed her head.

“Oops, sorry.” I glanced over to Rose, who wore the expression of a woman sentenced to life imprisonment. Figuring she’d be watching me, I clamped my eyes shut. It wouldn’t hurt Rose to pray, not that I attended church other than Easter and Christmas, and mostly because I liked the music. When you hum along with Handel’s *Messiah* you feel inspired. But Sundays I was busy orchestrating breakfast, reading the paper, and carpooling Daniel to soccer practice. And it was Frederick’s only time to unwind when not away on business or on the golf course.

“Dear heavenly Father, thank you for this meal, for Rose and Angela’s safe trip, and for our lives.” Silvia’s voice cracked with emotion. Then she finished with, “Each day is precious. Amen.”

“Amen,” Rose mumbled. She sliced off a morsel of chicken, plunked it between her lips, and swallowed. “Aunt Silvia, this is scrumptious.”

I sampled the chicken. “Yes, it tastes like a dish Mom made.”

Silvia said, “Thank you,” but her features lay passively, and she stared straight ahead at nothing in particular. Maybe out the window at the darkening sky?

Rose shot me a quirky glance, and I shrugged back.

I swallowed a mouthful of pasta. “Everything okay?” I touched Silvia’s speckled hand, startling her. “You’re not eating.”

The corners of her mouth lifted, but her eyes remained flat. She jabbed at a lettuce leaf and then set her fork aside. “Suddenly I’m all tuckered out. Would you mind if I napped for a little while?”

“Of course not. I’m worn out from the trip myself.” Tired of Rose was more like it.

Silvia used her hands to push herself to a standing position. Her napkin floated to the floor next to Rex, who sniffed it.

“Don’t you two girls do a thing. I’ll clean the kitchen in the morning.” Silvia padded out of the room on bare feet. She’d slipped off her shoes and left them under the table.

“Weird,” Rose muttered. For the first time in months I agreed with her.