

CHAPTER ONE



“A PRETTY TOUGH GUY”

*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves;
therefore be shrewd as serpents, and gentle as doves.*

JESUS CHRIST

In his mellow old age, my late grandfather, Big D, enjoyed sipping a glass of wine and telling stories about his life and his father, Luigi. “Tell us about Luigi, Big D. Please tell us about Luigi,” we’d beg him, like little kids, although by that time we were grown men.

He would pause, take a sip of wine, and look off into the distance, smiling at an old memory. A small appreciative laugh would follow. “He was a pretty tough guy, my dad,” he’d say. “Luigi was pretty tough.”

As you’ll see from these stories handed down from my grandfather, Luigi was a pretty tough guy. His tender side came out when he was a much older man spending his days tending tomato plants. It is evidenced in his proud smile captured in a photo as he walked his two daughters down the aisle to get married on the same day.

But what my grandfather knew firsthand about his father concerned the *warrior* Luigi, the *immigrant* Luigi, and the *survivor* Luigi.

Originating in Italy, the name Luigi means “renowned fighter,” a name my great-grandfather Luigi surely lived up to, though he was born Louis Vallorani. Traditional Italian naming practices would require that, as the second son, he be named for his maternal grandfather, who was still living. First sons were named for their paternal grandfather. It is quite common for nicknames to be used when so many of the same name live close together!

In those days very few had the means to own their own property and would, instead, tend the land of the wealthy for a share in the harvest. Though this feudal system began to disintegrate with the unification of Italy’s provinces, just a generation before Luigi’s birth, the majority of land was still owned by the wealthy and worked by those who were not wealthy.

Born to an impoverished farm family in the Marche Province, outside the small village of Offida, young Luigi vowed that he would not remain an uneducated poor farmer eking out a meager living among the rocky hills of his youth, struggling through life, always battling the wolves of hunger and low returns for his hard labor.

In 1911 the Ottoman Empire ruled great swaths of land in parts of Europe and North Africa. Boundary disputes and the ideological and religious differences of the Muslim Turks were considered great threats to the young Italian nation of Christians.

The Turks were proud of the inventive tortures they used on their helpless prisoners before “busting” them, one of the most barbaric and gruesome forms of execution, involving two swords cutting from shoulder to shoulder, beheading (or busting) the prisoner in the process.

As so many others of his generation had done, Luigi got his opportunity for adventure and heroism—and escape—when he was conscripted into military service to fight the Ottomans and their Muslim allies. After a brief military training, he found himself on a transport ship sailing to Libya where he would be a foot soldier in a hot, dusty invasion against Arab horsemen wielding swords.

At Benghazi and Sciara (Tripoli), bloody battles were fought. Thousands were lost. On one particular day, Luigi stood against charging horsemen and shot them one by one with his bolt-action rifle until he was trampled by the oncoming horses and rendered unconscious. When he came to, he found himself with a large group of other captured Italians, all of them bound and tied to boards as they waited to be sliced by Turkish swords.

Luigi watched grimly as the enemy gleefully and brutally killed the Italian survivors, one after another. Cursing and spitting at his captors, he prepared to die next. But just before the Turks could finish their bloodthirsty slaughter, an Italian counterattack halted the executions. Once freed, Luigi quickly recovered a weapon and charged back into the fray. I've always paused to consider how differently it could have gone. I wouldn't be here today if the timing had been just a little off!

Soon after, a peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Italy was established. The Ottoman troops agreed to remove themselves from Libya and allow Libya to remain under Italian oversight. It was a great victory for the Italians, who returned to Rome to march in a victory parade reminiscent of their ancient Roman forbearers.

The war over, Luigi set his sights on going where he believed the streets were paved with gold. He needed to find a way to sail for America. Like many young Italians of that day, Luigi thought of America as the Wild West—and he wasn't far from wrong.

In the early twentieth century, the Pittsburgh steel mills of western Pennsylvania had plenty of opportunities for newly arriving immigrants. Today, mere remnants of a bygone industry loom on the Monongahela riverside, but when Luigi arrived in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, it was the fastest-growing town in the country, with plenty of work in the steel mills for immigrants and ripe with possibilities for a young, entrepreneurially minded Italian. It was Luigi's goal from the beginning to work as a laborer only as long as it took to save enough money to start his own business.

He kept to himself, living in a boarding house and carrying with him his hard-earned money, at all times, to avoid having it stolen. One of the first purchases he made in America was a set of pearl-handled six-shooters, which he hid under his pillow in the room he shared with a roommate. What was his was his, and he intended to keep it that way.

He did not, at first, speak English very well but learned quickly and was soon able to distinguish English words well enough to understand conversations around him. It was because he was a sharp listener that he became aware of a plan his roommate was hatching with an accomplice to kill him and rob him of his hard-earned cash.

Thinking Luigi couldn't understand their English, the thieving, would-be killers made the mistake of talking about the plan in his presence. Luigi heard his roommate referring to the "dumb dago," and he began to eavesdrop on their plotting. His roommate planned to wait for him to fall asleep in their second-story room and then open a window to allow his accomplice to climb a ladder and enter the room. While the accomplice held Luigi down, the roommate would slit his throat and steal his stash of money. Both men would then flee out the window and down the ladder.

That night, Luigi feigned sleep with one of his loaded six-shooters clutched in his hand under the blanket. He listened intently as his roommate quietly opened the window to let in the accomplice climbing up the ladder. As soon as the climber's shoulders came through the open window, Luigi jumped up from his bed and shot the intruder point blank in the forehead, killing him instantly and sending his body and the ladder tumbling loudly to the ground below. Luigi then turned to his lunging roommate and pulled the trigger a second time, killing his would-be assassin. They had intended to show no mercy to Luigi, and Luigi showed none to either assailant. His descendants have owned one of the pearl-handled six-shooters to this day.

Even though he had killed in self-defense, Luigi knew he should slip away and go where people didn't know him. An old friend who had served with him in the war had also come to America and sought solace from his wartime memories by becoming a Catholic priest in a small Kentucky town. Luigi joined him there and quietly worked in a coal mine, saving every penny he could.

After a year, he felt it was safe to return to McKeesport. To serve the bustling Italian neighborhood there, he decided to open an Italian restaurant with the money he had been saving. One day, while he was strolling through the town, he heard a lovely girl named Maria DelMastro singing a beautiful song. Maria was a singer with a small band that performed in public parks where many immigrants and their families would gather to enjoy a pleasant Sunday afternoon. Luigi fell in love with Maria and, after obtaining permission from her father, married her.

Because Kentucky had less frigid winters than Pennsylvania and more opportunities to conduct business in less-crowded venues without as much competition, Luigi determined to sell his restaurant

and return to Kentucky. One story has it that on the evening a prospective buyer came to investigate the restaurant, Luigi invited all of his friends to come in for a free meal. That night, the restaurant was crowded and bursting at the seams, so Luigi made the sale easily and headed for the hills with his wife and the two six-shooters to protect the cash he carried.

Once resettled in Kentucky, Luigi briefly went to work again as a coal miner in order to realize his latest dream of opening a grocery store. The hills surrounding the coal mines were notorious for murders and robberies in early twentieth-century Kentucky. Luigi, ever mindful of danger, carried his firearms strapped to his sides at all times. One morning, on his way to work in the predawn darkness, he encountered a would-be robber. Those pearl-handled pistols saved his life once again.

But fate dealt the young couple a tragic blow when their first child, only months old, took sick and died during a return visit to McKeesport in 1920. A second child born in Kentucky two years later died only eleven days after his birth. When Maria became pregnant a third time, she went back to McKeesport to stay with her family so she could have her mother and sister with her to help with the baby. Maria gave birth in July 1923 to Eugenio Vallorani, who survived to become my grandfather. Once again, a sobering thought of how precious life is: only one of three babies survived, and I would not be here today if he had not.

Luigi finally opened his grocery store. He had no pity for his competition. When the grocer across the road lowered prices to try and put Luigi out of business, Luigi sneaked across the street after dark and raised the prices back up on the chalkboard outside the man's store. Times were hard, and he had no qualms about doing

whatever it took to keep his family fed and safe—to keep away the wolves baying at the door.

The wolves were never gone for long. Tragedy struck again when Maria died giving birth to a stillborn child in 1925. There seemed to be no peace in America, after all, and raising a child on his own was a daunting prospect. Tired of adventuring, and looking for a mother for his one surviving son, my grandfather, Luigi sold his store and took Eugenio back to McKeesport in the hope that Maria's family would care for him. Luigi had his heart set on returning to Italy. He wanted to marry an Italian woman, not an American woman, because he thought Italian women were less spoiled than American women.

When Maria's family couldn't agree to care for Eugenio for what would have been several years, likely because times were tough and he was so young and yet another mouth to feed, Luigi booked passage back to Italy for himself and his son.

Back in Italy, he settled in a farming community and used his American savings to buy farmland, vineyards, fruit orchards, and another grocery business. He found that Italian wife too. Agatha loved and cared for Eugenio, treating him as if he were her own son. And my grandfather loved his stepmother. Luigi and Agatha had three daughters—what a privilege it has been to meet two of them and their children and grandchildren. One of the daughters visited us in the USA in the 1980s, and another I met in Italy, twice, in 2011 and again in 2016.

Luigi never set foot in America again. We don't know why Luigi never came back to America. The year I was born, in 1973, he even applied for a US social security number from his home in Rimini, which suggests he meant to return, or at least to keep that possibility

open. Whatever his reasons for choosing not to return, he certainly did not give up his entrepreneurial endeavors.

He achieved his goal of becoming a wealthy businessman and was greatly respected as the *padrone* of his village. He had true allegiance only to his family and those who depended on him. As he began to grow up and attend school, Luigi's young son was keenly aware of his father's status. Eugenio knew his father had big plans for him.

As Luigi's only son, Eugenio was also treated with respect in the village. When a fellow student bullied young Eugenio, Luigi went to the home of the bully's father and gave the father a choice: either the father would punish the bully, or Luigi would do it for him. The father punished his son right there in front of him rather than chance Luigi's temper.

On another occasion, during harvest season, young Eugenio was watching his father order one of the workers to stop his children from stealing fruit from the trees in his orchard. The worker made the mistake of picking up a clump of dirt and throwing it at Luigi in response. Luigi struck back by pummeling the recalcitrant worker. Then Luigi picked the man up, slung him over his shoulder, and carried him up a ladder with the apparent intention of throwing the disrespectful thief into the threshing machine. The other workers stopped Luigi before he did so, but the message was sent. Nobody stole his fruit after that.

Luigi disliked bullies, but during those days the biggest bullies of the twentieth century were rising in power: Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini. My grandfather was required to join a military youth group and was sent to march in a parade in support of Mussolini and Hitler. Luigi wanted no part of his son being pressed into the service of fascism. Having survived the horrors of his own

wartime experience, Luigi was determined to keep Eugenio from the impending slaughter. He knew the only chance his son would have to avoid the political upheaval and ensuing bloody war was to be sent back to America to live.

The day of the big fascist parade in downtown Rome, Luigi watched reluctantly as young Eugenio marched. The boys extended their right arms straight out and saluted. It made Luigi disgusted to watch, so afterward, he proceeded directly to the US embassy and told the officials there how his boy had been born in Kentucky and was an American citizen, and he wanted to repatriate Eugenio in the US. He had Eugenio's birth certificate as proof and was able to get a US passport issued to him.

We still have that passport, and I have stood in front of that US Embassy in Rome. Seeing these places and knowing how important they were to my family's subsequent lives fills me with awe. How different history—my history—could have been had Luigi not been a "pretty tough guy."

Lighting one of his strong cigars, Luigi broke the news to his son that he was going to be sent to live with his mother's brothers in America. He was sitting by a fireplace and set his cigar on the mantle to stoke the fire. When he reached up to retrieve his cigar from the mantle, he accidentally picked up a scorpion lying there unnoticed beside his cigar.

Luigi immediately threw the venomous pest into the fire and realized he had been given the perfect example. He explained to his son why he was sending him back to America: As was the scorpion on the mantle, Mussolini and Hitler were both venomous men who would bring great harm. Until someone threw them into the fire, Luigi felt it best to protect his son by sending him back to Pennsylvania.

Fifteen-year-old Eugenio sailed to America on a ship called *The Rex*. There he became known as Eugene. It would be years before Eugene would get to see his father again. Because of the expense of the journey, they only saw each other twice again. In 1964 Eugene was able to return to Italy for one visit, and in 1972 he took his wife, my aunt, and my uncle and made another trip to Italy. Unfortunately, my father decided not to make the trip because he had just married my mother and felt the trip would be financially unwise. He has always regretted this decision.

Undefeated by thieves, killers, nations, and dictators, Luigi passed quietly in his sleep in Italy in February 1974, just a few months after my birth. While my father and I never got to meet Luigi in person, Luigi congratulated his son Eugene on the birth of a grandson (me). I cherish a letter he sent to my father prior to my birth, written in neat English.

In April 2016 I was able to visit Luigi's grave in Rimini, with his youngest daughter. At the age of eighty-three, Antonietta still tears up and lovingly whispers, "Papa Gi-Gi" as she crosses herself and touches her kissed fingers to a photo on his tomb.

His legacy lives on and inspires me to be a strong man, a sharp-thinking entrepreneur, and a protective father.

What I Know to Be True

Never give up. It took three tries for my great-grandfather to have a son who survived to carry on the Vallorani name. He never stopped trying to do more. While he did not settle in the United States to pursue the American dream for himself, he achieved it for his

family by planting the seeds of success. We reaped what Luigi sowed.

In business, you must be shrewd. In life, you should be prepared to defend yourself from all manner of wolves. Yet there is time to find moments of peaceful mandolin music in the enjoyment of a cigar or a glass of wine, and it is those moments that give us the stamina to continue the battle another day.

I subscribe to the Tarzan principle: Just keep swinging. The idea is to grab the next opportunity and keep swinging through the jungle. Following the example of my ancestors, I have used this principle many times in my life.

Despite the wolves in life—hardships, challenges, naysayers, even our own inner demons—we can enjoy the music of the mandolin, the good things in life. But nothing comes easy. We must have a vision, work hard, take risks, and make sacrifices. We don't talk about achieving it; we simply determine to achieve it. And we celebrate our victories with style.

That's where my brand comes into play: Vallorani Estates presents a lifestyle and curated products that are inspired by my family to bring melodious moments to your life to fight off life's wolves. Our philosophy is work hard, play hard. Be shrewd as a serpent, gentle as a dove, and survive as a sheep in the midst of wolves.