

# Prologue



— July 26, 1956 —

“Don’t jump!” we heard the crewman beg from above.  
“Wait your turn for the rope! Everybody, wait your turn!”

*Is Patrick going to listen to an adult for the first time?* I wondered in suspense.

I watched my ship buddy lower his leg from the metal railing. Those of us already in the lifeboat understood Patrick’s dilemma: Should a nine-year-old take his chances at survival by plunging into the black, shark-infested waters and swimming to the lifeboat? Or should he wait his turn behind other desperate passengers waiting to take lives into their own hands—literally—by grabbing the rope and slowly descending several stories?

Patrick was holding his mother and his older sister, Darlene, away from the railing, as if in command of the situation. Before

I WAS SHIPWRECKED ON THE ANDREA DORIA!

my grandparents and I had abandoned the listing vessel, Patrick had been encouraging his family to jump, telling them, “I know the ship’s gonna sink. We have to jump now!” Was he now willing to obey orders for the first time on this ten-day voyage?

We saw dozens of passengers taking deliberate steps toward the only rope down to the ocean. *Come on, come on!* I cheered them on in my mind.

They seemed patient, perhaps because there was nowhere else to go. But once it was their turn to hurl their bodies over the railing, reach for the rope, and lower themselves, they became more agitated. Some screamed and refused to do it. Others cursed those who froze in panic halfway to the lifeboat. “Let go! Keep moving! If you don’t keep moving, I’ll come and step on your hands!” Some of them did just that; their victims fell into our bobbing vessel with a thud.

My buddy Patrick took to the rope with the ease of an ape in his native jungle. As his sister and his mother and the rest of us watched, Patrick showed off his boldness. Wearing his orange life vest, he flung his body over the railing, grabbed the rope, and began to swing—as far from the sinking vessel as his strength would allow him.

“What’s that crazy kid doing?” someone yelled from the lifeboat. I watched nervously (and in secret admiration) as Patrick’s little body whirled in circles above our heads. *Patrick is up to his daredevil self*, I thought. *He’s enjoying one more*

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*adventure on the high seas.*

Suddenly, after a few moments of comic relief, my heart stopped, as a collective gasp rose from my fellow survivors. Patrick's luck was being challenged. Halfway through one of his swings, his life vest got stuck on a hook sticking out from the side of the ship, and the rope was swinging by itself.

I looked at my grandparents; they were making the sign of the cross. They looked more scared than when they'd been desperately making their own way down to the lifeboat on the rope, my grandma holding her purse, my grandpa with his briefcase in one hand.

*How can Patrick get unstuck?* I asked myself.

I held my breath. My friend's arms and legs flailed as he fumbled fiercely to grab the back of his life vest. He reminded me of a freshly hooked fish frantically flipping its body with all its might in a fight for freedom. Except that Patrick didn't seem truly frantic—just busy.

"Look at that old man running down to the next deck! Maybe he's headed for Patrick!" a young woman in the lifeboat hollered.

The old man reached Patrick, unhooked the life vest, and gave the boy a push toward the swinging rope. Patrick caught it in midair and made a swift descent. He landed with a thump—and a smile on his face! His mother and sister, who had been watching all of this while waiting in line, hugged each other and cried.

*They're so happy! Thank God!* I was relieved for my friends.

No one dared to say anything except for the French crewman who had rowed from the rescue ship. "You're lucky to be alive, *mon ami!*"

A woman exclaimed, "We're all safe now!"

"You're not safe yet, Madame," the Frenchman said, pointing to the giant funnel almost parallel to the ocean, hovering over our heads, ready to capsize the luxury liner *Andrea Doria*.

Others scrambled to climb down, including Patrick's family. I waited to see Darlene's reaction toward her brother. She simply hugged him, as did his mother. None of us felt very expressive; we were mostly just vomiting as the swell of each wave drove us upward, smashed into the hull of the ship, and swooped back down.

"Lower your heads so I don't hit you with the oars," the crewman warned us. He looked exhausted as he rowed a packed lifeboat back to his French liner.

Patrick refused to duck. I heard him say to his mother, "I don't wanna smell all this vomit!" He wasn't going near the floor of the bobbing vessel.

I retched and retched. I was a nine-year-old girl who had been swallowing fear and trauma for hours. I was too tired to think about how, just hours earlier, my family had been heading from our home in Italy toward the promised land of America. All I could think was, *Is everyone going to get off the ship and make it home?*