

Sweet Hope

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Excerpt from Chapter One: Saving Tobe

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Tobe motioned for Osvaldo to follow him closer to the river's edge. Sand ripples showed underneath the water until, a yard from shore, the bottom disappeared into murkiness.

The sandbar was five feet wide and nearly fifteen feet long, an easy target. Tobe's stones hit the edge of the bar, but Osvaldo's always splashed short. Soon they were panting from the exertion. Tobe poked his toes into the water. Osvaldo took off his shoes and stood beside Tobe, the cool water tickling his feet.

Tobe told Osvaldo how a whole steamship with hundreds of people on board was sitting at the river bottom right there where he was pointing. He repeated words for Osvaldo to say: "river," "gold," "pirates."

The river flowed steadfastly past them. Ocean waves pushed a shell or a clump of weeds onto the shore, then sucked it out, then threw it back on shore again. But whatever this river took did not come back.

"Go on," Tobe encouraged him, knowing the dangers of playing in the forbidden river. "Go swim." He pointed to the sandbar. "Swim on out to the sandbar." He motioned to his waist, assuring Osvaldo that the water was only that deep. Tobe found a stick, then poked it into the water as far in front of him as he could reach. "See? Ain't even deep," he said.

They were standing in the shallow water to their ankles, whipping the stick in the water and stirring up the muddy bottom while the woods behind them thrummed with insects and birdsong. “Big ol’ giant fish live out in the deep middle,” Tobe said. “He jump up one time, swallow a whole river boat, all one gulp.” He squatted down, so low that water lapped at his rear end.

Then they were both sitting in the water. Tobe flung off his ragged shirt. They leaned back on their elbows and let their legs float, the current swaying them toward the landing.

Oswaldo heard a sound, like branches moving or someone walking, coming from the woods behind them, above the sound of the river. He touched Tobe’s arm, and motioned for him to listen. But no parents emerged, no sisters. It gave Oswaldo a creepy feeling, as if the woods were alive and had eyes.

A great white bird rose up from the grassy shore nearby and flapped across the water, pulling its long dark legs in close to its body, its bulky wings almost dipping into the water as it skimmed the surface. And then the bird rose higher, stretched its crooked neck, made a graceful swooping turn and landed farther down near the shore.

Oswaldo asked Tobe if he’d seen the bird, but Tobe merely flopped onto his stomach and rested his chin in his hands, his legs floating behind him. Water licked at his face and he laughed and raised his chin. He had done this only once before, alone, but now with another boy beside him it was as if he had always played in the river.

Then a turtle floated by, and the boys waded in water to their knees to retrieve it.

Now that Tobe was in the water and his feet were still touching bottom, all the warnings he had heard about playing in the river vanished. It wasn’t until his foot slipped and he felt his leg dropping, and then his body following, that something woke in him. He thrashed his arms and screamed for help.

Oswaldo took a step toward him, and then stopped. Tobe churned his arms toward shore as the current pulled him slowly in

the opposite direction. His mouth opened and shut as he tried to cry out for help while spitting to keep the water from choking him.

Oswaldo turned toward the trees. “*Aiuto!*” he shouted. “*Aiuto!*” He turned back and shouted in Italian for Tobe to swim, and he tried to reach an arm out to him. Finally he ran for the stick the boy had been playing with and called for Tobe to grab it, but the stick was ridiculously short. All the while Tobe’s panicked eyes stayed on Oswaldo. His face bobbed farther out in the water, so that he looked like a flower, a dark floating blossom. Oswaldo stared mutely at the bobbing flower, then took off running for the trees.

Their dinner break was nearly over when Fancy Hall and Amalia Pascala each looked up, their noses raised as if catching something in the air. Their eyes moved slowly over the children and adults sprawled around them, and their ears listened, although neither of them knew in those moments what they were listening for. Their eyes met briefly as they rose to their feet. By the time they were standing, what their bodies had unknowingly sensed turned to sudden consciousness. Within seconds the entire group was running into the woods, calling for the boys.

They broke through the trees onto the sandy clearing at the same time Oswaldo leaped from the sand into the scrub oaks, shouting incoherently. Step Hall reached out as if to steady himself and caught the boy by the arm. For a moment Oswaldo dangled in mid-air while a dozen pairs of startled eyes watched his churning feet, the great river flowing behind him. Then Step dropped the boy and they ran for the river.

Fancy screamed when she saw her son slapping at the water, a dull, exhausted look on his face. He had already been carried another twenty feet downstream and farther away from shore.

Step splashed into the water while his wife followed, her arms stretched toward the boy. The others grabbed her skirt to keep her from throwing herself into the river. Step’s foot slipped at a drop-

off, and he plunged into water to his waist. He struggled against the current to keep his footing. Someone called for a rope, and the scrawny old man ran back to the wagons. Another man cursed himself for not bringing a rope when they had first run into the woods. Where else would young boys be, after all, than in the river where they weren't supposed to be?

As if on cue, the black Americans joined hands, making a chain of their bodies that allowed Step to venture farther into the water. The Italians added their own bodies as links in the chain. But the water became too deep and the current too strong. "Daddy," Tobe gasped as the river tugged at him. The distance widened between them.

Amalia pulled Osvaldo close and called the girls to her side. "Pray for the little boy," she told them.

Serafin waded into the water, holding onto the outstretched arms until he reached Step Hall, the shouting and crying close in his ears. He grabbed Step's arm and leaned over the river, reaching for Tobe as if beckoning him from the water. The motion jarred him: once again he was touching his brother Valerio's hand. He held the fingers for a moment, and then Valerio disappeared.

He let go of Step Hall. His feet touched bottom for just a moment before the current lifted him and he started swimming.

"Fool, Serafin!" Amalia shrieked. "Come back."

Osvaldo watched in horror as his father was carried away. "Daddy," he cried out. "Where are you going?" He knew he was the cause of this. "*Mi scusa*," Osvaldo cried.

Serafin had seen foolish young men who thought they could fight the sea and win – a dangerous attitude for a fisherman to have. He never thought of himself as such a man, but now he felt his anger against the river rising, and he tried to calm it. It was the anger that killed you.

It was easy to reach the boy, as he knew it would be. Returning would be another matter. Tobe turned his eyes to Serafin like a baby waking from sleep. "*Stai bene*," Serafin told him. "You're

going to be okay.” He slipped his arm under Tobe’s, lifting him in the water so that he could breathe. Tobe whimpered.

The water cradled Serafin and the boy as they held each other. Then Serafin turned his head sharply, to see how far he had drifted from shore, and the sight shocked him. I may as well be in the middle of the ocean, he thought.

The water felt surprisingly cold now. It tugged at his legs, and for a moment he kicked out violently, thinking he had become snagged in something, but it was only the current playing tricks on him. He plowed the water with his right arm while he fought to keep the boy above water with the other. He heard nothing from shore, but he saw the tense, frightened faces watching him, the way he had watched twice from his boat. The cold water made his legs feel heavy and sluggish. The boy was weightless beside him, an empty burlap sack. “*Stai bene?*” he called out, his lips brushing the boy’s cheek like a kiss. There was no answer, just a slight movement, perhaps the splash of a hand.

His arm ached. He wondered how such a small child had been able to swim against the current for so long. He told himself to try not to think about the pain and the distance between himself and shore. It would have been hard enough to swim with both arms, but this way, holding onto the boy, it seemed impossible. Just one more stroke. One more and then another and then another.

Lazzaro waved his arms at Serafin as the group followed him slowly downstream. “Be strong,” Lazzaro shouted. “Don’t give up.” Suddenly Serafin was afraid. It was as if the river had stopped for a moment and he could see everything clearly. It had not crossed his mind when he stepped into the water that he might not come out alive. Now he saw the terrified looks on his wife and children and best friend.

“Don’t give up, hold on,” Lazzaro called, and Serafin was stunned to realize he was drowning. What would happen to his wife and children? How could he leave them alone in the hell he had brought them to, with the pain of his death to further burden

them? Visiting him at Hyner cemetery, where the rest of the godforsaken Italians lay.

A black man waded into the water, extending a rope to Serafin, then letting it drop when he saw that a rope was useless. “Come on,” Lazzaro shouted. “Just a little more.” Serafin blinked his eyes hard, trying to clear the water from them, and he was surprised a second time to realize he had actually inched himself closer to shore, even though the current carried him downstream. Just his fate, he thought, to die like this, not a mule’s length from being saved.

The group formed a human chain again and eased into deeper water. Serafin found himself looking into the face of Step Hall, who held the rope. They were shouting at him and at each other, but a rushing sound filled his ears, and he could not make out their words. Step leaned into the river while the others held him. His face tensed, the eyes narrowed as he studied Serafin’s face with the look of someone backed into a corner and gauging his last desperate move. Then Step Hall tossed the loop of rope with his one free hand. Serafin watched its slow flight in the air; it seemed to hang suspended in front of his eyes before plopping gently in the water a few feet in front of him. Several times Step pulled in the noose, then tossed it out again. Finally he stopped and cursed himself, fretting over the rope as if searching for the flaw in it. Then he leaned forward once more, set a steady gaze on Serafin’s face and let go the rope. It sailed before Serafin’s eyes for a moment – a fleeting shadow, a leaf blowing in the wind – before floating down over his head. Step let out a quick, triumphant shout, then pulled, and Serafin felt the pressure against the back of his neck. He raised his head in the water and arched his neck to keep the rope from slipping off. And then Step reached out, snagged Serafin’s hand and pulled him in.

Step and Fancy Hall snatched their son from Serafin as he collapsed on his knees ashore. He felt the air heave around him, like a gust blowing in and out of a room. It was his family

gathering at his side. And then there came a barely discernible touch, Amalia's hand on his arm, removing the rope from his neck.

Serafin noticed in the same hazy way the commotion a short distance from him, Fancy Hall crying and rocking her son as the others pried the boy out of her hands and laid him on the grass. Step slapped at his son and shook him saying, "Come on boy, come on boy" through gritted teeth until finally the boy coughed and vomited. Fancy touched Tobe's face, his chest, his arms. "Did you ever think?" she cried. "Oh Lord, did you ever think?"

Amalia slapped Serafin across the face with such force that he fell sideways.

"What the hell did you think you were doing going out there, leaving us?" she screamed at him. "I know your men die in water!"

"*Dio santo*," Fiorenza said, pulling her away. Amalia cursed Serafin, beating at his face while Fiorenza struggled to hold her back. Lazzaro pinned Amalia's arms to her sides until they went still and she began sobbing.

Serafin righted himself on his knees, taking his children's hands for support. "It's okay," he tried to say, but what came out sounded like he was attempting to clear his throat. He knelt for a minute, catching his breath, waiting for the feeling in his arm to return.

"You okay?" Lazzaro asked.

His wife and children stared at him mutely, their silence more painful than anything his muscles had felt in the water.

"Let me breathe," Serafin told them.

And Tobe was a newborn calf a few yards away, trembling and skinny and slick with water. His father helped him to his feet, but the boy's legs gave way and he sprawled on the ground, looking up at them with bewildered eyes.

Step put his hand on the boy's head. "Lay still now," he told him. "Let your strength come back." One of the men took off his shirt and laid it over Tobe's chest.

Serafin felt his hands stinging now, from the water drying in the cuts he had gotten from baling hay. Pale, bloated lines

crisscrossed his palms, the whitened edges of the cuts like the mouths of dead fish.

He was there, all over again, four years ago, looking into Valerio's white, stone face as he lay dripping in the bottom of the boat. That awful understanding: his brother was dead. It was final; there was no changing it. If they had pulled him out of the water two minutes sooner, one minute, who knows?

Serafin had left in the dark morning as usual, taking Valerio along as he sometimes did. They had slipped out into deep water with Valerio talking about a girl he had met on the *via Villanova*, how he had walked with her all the way down to the sea and had gotten up the courage to kiss her just when she bent over to pick up a piece of driftwood. "I was kissing the air," he laughed. Talking, talking, always talking. They had gone out in his boat with Valerio talking and returned three hours later with Valerio dead. There was no way to explain the anguish. Valerio was no more.

Serafin knelt at the riverbank clutching his stomach, sobbing.

And yet the boy, Tobe Hall, was saved. Wonder mingled with grief, astonishment as heavy as grief, and painful, too, an astonishing, beautiful pain impossible to comprehend.

Valerio, after four years dead, you have come back to us?

The others watched uneasily. Step Hall's jaw tightened as he waited to see what would happen.

"It's okay," Lazzaro told Serafin. He tried to take the man by his shoulders, raise him to his feet, but Serafin could not be moved. "Everything's all right now, my friend," he told Serafin in a gentle, coaxing voice.

Lazzaro and Fiorenza exchanged glances with Amalia. It had been a while since they had seen Serafin like this. Amalia had been on the verge of telling Fiorenza of her plan to take the children and leave Serafin, even though such a thing was *infamante*. But then Serafin started to talk about America, and his old self came back, so she stayed with him and never mentioned the secret that she carried in her heart.

Serafin glanced over at Osvaldo, at his bare feet, the wet clothes. “What the devil were you doing in that river?” he said. His voice was weak, but the words made sense now. Osvaldo stepped closer to his mother, keeping his eyes alert.

“It’s okay,” Lazzaro told him. “*Grazie a Dio*, nobody got hurt.”

“Hurt?” Serafin shook his head, as if he did not understand the meaning of the word.

“Go get your shoes,” Amalia scolded Osvaldo, the fear trembling beneath her words. Osvaldo trudged away, searching the riverbank for his shoes.

Serafin’s own shoes were on his feet. He thought of this now, how if he had taken them off first it might have been easier to swim. He could have drowned because of a pair of shoes.

Step Hall was standing before him. He grasped Serafin’s hand with a powerful grip and pulled him to his feet. Step squinted into Serafin’s eyes, as if straining to see something. Serafin smiled uneasily, tried to move his hand away. But Step Hall squeezed the hand tighter in his. Serafin flinched from the pain.

“*Niente*, it’s nothing,” he told Step. “I did nothing.” He looked around helplessly. “You – you saved us both.”

Lazzaro laid a hand on Step’s shoulder. Finally the man let go of Serafin. They stood awkwardly, like drunken men, unable to speak, not even knowing what it was they wanted to say.

Step looked out at the river, then over at his wife and boy a long time. His feet were lead. For all his dreams, he was useless after all. He turned and called gruffly for the group to move along. He lifted his son and laid him against his shoulder like a baby, and when he started walking his family and friends followed.

The Italians fell in behind them, Osvaldo barefoot and carrying his shoes in his hands while his father stumbled forward, steering the boy with one hand laid across his neck. Serafin squinted ahead at the dark shape resting in his father’s arms: the boy who was not Valerio. Behind them Amalia and the girls trailed, subdued and silent, and Lazzaro and his wife and the old lady, back to the hay field below the levee, back to the sweet grass and the grazing cows

and the acres of flat, silent, dusty land, away from the beautiful,
merciless river.