

## **CHAPTER ONE**

Nicola Romolo focused on the vineyard below, inhaling the sweet scent of basil and rosemary budding nearby. He noticed Signor Lorenzo, the business manager for the Silvano vineyard, checking the grapevine seedlings Nicola and his crew had planted earlier. His heart skipped a beat. He opened his pocket watch. It was nearly six. Lorenzo always checked the day's work at this time. Nicola tried to squelch the worry that Lorenzo had seen him making love to Gianna Silvano yesterday.

The earth, soggy after a needed rain, yielded to his step. He curled a finger around a suspender feeling guilty for leaving his father's bedside, but he needed to reason things out. He and Gianna, the vineyard owner's daughter, had been meeting secretly for several months. They would sit and talk beneath an ancient olive tree, centermost in a row at the east side of the vineyard. He'd chosen the place because it was out of view of his cottage and the Silvano's stately Casa L'albero, but still in view of his beloved Apennines where he and Gianna had played as children.

Usually Nicola checked the vineyard to make sure no one was around before meeting Gianna, but something had been different last evening. He didn't understand why his will power had crumbled. His resolve had failed when he'd kissed her honey-tasting lips and inhaled her perfume, redolent of lilacs.

If only he'd stopped her from unfastening the blouse's small pearl buttons and avoided the long lingering look at her naked body and the feel of her breast in his hand. Even now his loins stirred, remembering how easily Gianna's body had moved beneath his and how they'd molded perfectly. She'd called his name and moaned delightedly just before he exploded and lay spent on her chest. Before she'd left, he'd promised to speak to her father and ask for her hand in marriage. She'd agreed, telling him she was his forever.

Usually Signor Silvano treated him like a son, but today, Gianna's father had avoided him. Nothing he could do about it now. He'd speak with Silvano tomorrow.

Lorenzo was leaving. Nicola closed the pocket watch. His father had carved May 1, 1900, into its cover to commemorate Nicola's twentieth birthday a few days ago. Inside their small cottage, his father lay dying from pneumonia. Nicola wasn't prepared to lose the man he dearly loved.

His father's passing meant Nicola would become foreman on the Silvano vineyard where his family had toiled since his birth. He proudly called this place home since the vineyard produced the Vin Nobile—the finest wine in all of the newly united country of Italy.

He walked over to his horse tied to the *corbezzolo*. Swollen buds hung in clusters, which would soon produce a strawberry-like fruit. A strand of curly black hair tickled his forehead, and he shoved it under his cap. He stood proud with a *Bella Figura*, a confidence that came from looking one's best, and it was helped by the new plain brown *camicia* his mother, Alessandra, had made. But seeing Lorenzo made his self-assuredness sink like the fading sun.

To the right, cypresses lined the road like soldiers guarding his hometown of Montepulciano. He hoped he hadn't lost his chance to raise a family here.

Time for thinking was past. He had to tend to his father. He rinsed a chamber pot with water from the nearby well. At the door of the cottage, he pushed back a vine that had started up the masonry wall. The wrought iron handle squeaked when he lifted it to open the oak door in need of fresh stain.

The air in his parent's room was stale since the tiny window was closed. His father winced. Nicola drew a stool close to Edmondo's bedside, feeling helpless as he watched the elder Romolo gasp. He stared at the image of St. Agnes imbedded in the wrought iron bed frame and as he wiped sweat from his father's forehead, he whispered a prayer to the patron saint of Montepulciano. Noticing, the sparkle had been snuffed from Edmondo's hazel eyes, Nicola tried to suppress the thought that his father wouldn't make it through the night. He sighed.

Earlier, Silvano had sent a doctor who told the family Edmondo's pneumonia couldn't be treated any further. He suggested they keep him warm, feed him hot broth, and elevate his head on pillows to ease his breathing.

Frustrated, Nicola wiped a stray tear. Gone would be the long talks about wine making, walks through the vineyard, and whispers of sailing to America to start a new life. His father had never told him he loved him, but Nicola felt it in Edmondo's actions and encouraging words.

Vigil lights flickered, illuminating the crevasses on the ancient stone wall as well as the face of the Blessed Virgin, a milk-glass statue his parents had received as a wedding present.

"Nicola." His father rasped. A gurgle came from deep within his chest.

"Don't talk now. I'll stay with you." He took his father's hand.

"Armoire, top drawer." His father motioned feebly, then dropped his arm as if it were a wet rag.

"What, Papa? Something you want?"

“Open... Get it.”

The ancient cherry doors squeaked. The top drawer wouldn't budge.

He turned to his father. “It's locked, Papa.”

“Key...here.” Edmondo pointed to his neck.

Nicola's fingers shook as he lifted his father's head and removed the chain. He jiggled the key several times before the drawer's lock gave way. Inside was a red velvet case.

His father coughed. “Bring here.”

Nicola handed it over and sank on the edge of the feather mattress.

Edmondo opened the case. Half of a gold medallion lay on a satin lining.

Nicola stared wide-eyed. Although it had been split, the intricately carved shape of a woman was evident. It was old Nicola thought, and valuable. “Where did you get this?”

“Your grandfather.”

Nicola caressed the cool metal.

“St. Catherine,” his father whispered. “Our family...not always poor.”

For a quick second, a light shone in the older man's eyes. He hacked up bright red blood, which dribbled down his chin. “Yours. Find...other...half. Learn...secret. Tell no one.” His father gasped for breath and winced. “Keep...chain and key. I need...rest.”

Edmondo closed his eyes.

Nicola studied his father's face and wiped the spittle from his chin. Questions abounded, but his father looked too peaceful. He took the medallion to his room, locking it in a large chest.

He lay on his bed and closed his eyes. As he drifted off, he saw Gianna's face and smiled.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

The aroma of pork, sautéing in olive oil and tomatoes woke Nicola from his short nap. His stomach rumbled. Dishes clattered, signaling his younger sister, Eleonora, labored in the kitchen. His mother's brother, Father Carmine Gavino, had traveled from Napoli to give Edmondo last rites and had brought food. Nicola salivated. He hadn't eaten meat in a month as their normal diet consisted of polenta, beans and cabbage, and bread soup.

Out the bedroom window, Montepulciano's encircling walls and the tower of the Madonna di San Biagio's church conjured memories of his family walking to mass together and long lazy Sunday picnics in the public park where he watched his father playing Bocce while his mother gossiped with the other women. The potluck feasts had included jugs of wine, pungent cheeses, and hard crusted bread. Sometimes there would be salami or thin ham slices.

In the opposite direction were rows of grape vines heavy with budding Sangiovese grapes, now as green as the plant's leaves. The cherished memories of tending vines with his father and learning to run the presses brought fresh tears.

He refocused, wondering if Gianna had said something about their relationship to her father. But last night before they'd parted, he'd made her vow not to say anything. He now decided it best if they spoke to her father together. Surely Silvano would be pleased Nicola wanted to marry Gianna. He would probably make him a foreman right away.

Since his father's illness, Nicola had assumed some of Edmondo's responsibilities. Silvano not only trained him in the farm equipment's use and storage, he also taught him how to check the temperature on the fermenting wine-filled vats. He'd shown him the bottling room and the technique they used for filling and labeling the bottles. Silvano complimented Nicola's work, seemingly preparing him to take over more responsibility. He shook his head, deciding Silvano's avoidance wasn't connected to him making love to Gianna.

He turned his thoughts to the medallion and his father's mention of family wealth. What had he meant? Where would he look for the medallion's other half? He'd ask Edmondo later. Last night, with reluctance he'd vowed to his father to provide for his mother and sister. Hopefully he'd have enough money to carry out his father's wishes and

make his own dreams and plans come true.

He perked up when he heard his mother and uncle discussing whether the Romolos would be allowed to stay in the house since Silvano had said nothing. Nicola figured it would be settled once he asked Silvano for Gianna's hand.

"Dinner's ready," Eleonora announced.

Nicola peeked in on his father who slept peacefully, tucked under one of his mother's homemade quilts. He joined the rest of the family seated around the wooden kitchen table covered with a lace tablecloth. His father's empty chair added to his melancholy.

"Is your papa still sleeping?" His mother brushed a stray black hair back into her anchored bun. Apron strings disappeared around her ample middle, and her bosom stretched the seams of her tattered gray dress. Wrinkles formed crevices under her brown eyes.

"Si. He's resting."

"I'll take him tea later. Now, Carmine, will you say grace?" She looked in her brother's direction, seeking comfort.

The family held hands while the priest blessed their meal, asking for God's mercy in relieving Edmondo's pain. After clinking tumblers and saying "*Salute*," they dug into the food.

"You're a remarkable cook, Eleonora," Carmine said. "This is delicious." His flowing black robe concealed his muscular body. His fair complexion, blond hair, and hazel eyes contrasted sharply with his sister's dark features, but they both shared the prominent Gavino nose.

Eleonora blushed. "*Grazie*, Uncle."

"My daughter has many talents," Alessandra said. She put her right hand over her heart. "And she's beautiful, too."

"She is," Carmine said. "A younger version of you, Alessandra. She'll make a fine wife and mother someday."

Alessandra looked at Nicola. "Uncle Carmine has a job for you." She mopped up the tomato-laced broth with a slice of thick bread. Eleonora had made it the Tuscan way, without salt, which gave the bread a longer life since it didn't absorb moisture.

Nicola kicked the legs of the old oak table, hating the way the elders talked as if his fate rested in their hands. At twenty, he wanted to direct his own destiny.

"I have a job here," Nicola said. He wasn't about to leave Gianna or this vineyard that he so loved.

"We can't live here after your father passes on."

"But where will we go?" Eleonora asked. Tiny lines creased her forehead, her round brown eyes widened.

"You and I will live with your Aunt Felicita in Montepulciano, and Nicola will go to Napoli with your uncle." Alessandra stroked her daughter's hand. "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

Eleonora sighed with relief, but Nicola's nostrils flared. "I'm old enough to make my own decisions. Besides, why would Silvano make us leave?" He swallowed the urge to blurt out his intentions to marry Gianna.

His mother and uncle exchanged glances. "We'll talk about that later," his uncle said calmly. "The responsibility of the family rests with you now that your father isn't able to work."

A caged animal couldn't have felt more trapped. Nicola's dream of running a vineyard faded. "I have plans of my own." He hung his head, feeling selfish. He soon would be head of the house and responsible for his family's welfare.

"Look, Nicola." His mother took his hand. "You're our only hope. This isn't what your father and I wanted, but we need you."

His mother's pleading eyes pressured Nicola. Practicality and family came first in Italy. He'd been raised on it. He turned to his uncle and struggled to match the priest's level tone. "So what's this job all about?"

"The shops in Napoli hire men to protect their businesses. One of my most prominent parishioners told me about it. He's willing to hire you."

Nicola gulped. He'd never been to Napoli since there wasn't money for train fare. "But where will I live?"

"In the rectory until you can afford your own place. My house-keeper has a room ready for you."

"I won't go." He slammed his fist on the table, making the dishes dance.

Uncle Carmine stared at him. Eleonora sucked in her breath. His mother shook a spoon near his face. "Nicola, don't be stubborn. You must go. How do you think Eleonora and I will eat? My brother has gone to a great deal of trouble to help. You will do as you're told. I know your father would say the same thing."

Nicola realized once he married Gianna and became a foreman on the vineyard all this would change, but he didn't want his family to know his plans until after he spoke with Silvano. "Okay, Mama, I'll go."

"Well, that's settled," his mother said. "Eleonora, why don't you serve the *cantucci*?"

"Si, Mama."

Eleonora artfully displayed the hard sweet biscuits on a plate, poured the *Vin Santo* wine into a small tumbler, set it in the center, then passed it around. They each dipped a biscuit in the wine.

"Carmine, please thank your housekeeper for such a treat. We don't often have dessert."

"My pleasure. I wish I could visit more often."

Eleonora looked at her uncle. "Uncle Carmine, what is Napoli like?"

"It's a beautiful city, bustling with shops and trattorias. But it can be dangerous."

“Dangerous?”

“Well, for a young woman. You know, there’s a legend in Napoli.”

“Please tell us about it.” Eleonora’s eyes widened dreamily.

“It is said that a mythical creature called the Parthenopean ruled the sea around the city. This beautiful but dangerous being had the body of a bird and the face of a stunning young girl—much like you.” Uncle Carmine reached and ran his finger across Eleonora’s cheek, making her blush. “Anyway, sailors became bewitched by the irresistible songs of the creature, and those of the sirens who lived nearby. The spell caused many ships to crash into the seawall. Only Ulysses, the hero of Ithaca, escaped this fate by forcing his crew to plug their ears with wax so they wouldn’t hear the song.”

“Such stories,” Alessandra said. “Carmine, you shouldn’t fill this young girl’s head with those tales.”

“But Mama, it sounds so beautiful! I want to see it and hear these songs.”

“My sweet girl, this happened many centuries ago when the Greek ships visited our country. The songs have long been silenced.”

Nicola cleared his throat. “May I be excused?” He needed to be on time for his meeting with Gianna, and this talk about Napoli upset him.

“Si,” his mother said, pushing away from the table. “I’ll go check on your father.”

Nicola rushed out anxious to rid himself of family duties.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

Nicola ran down the path, stopping by a row of mature olive trees facing the vineyard. He removed his cap, a new one recently made by his mother. She'd told him it was a copy of Borsalino's newsboy style, very fashionable.

He looked around and waited under the same old olive tree where he and Gianna had made love last night. The sun was starting a slow descent behind the pointed peaks of the distant foothills, but there was still enough light for him to see the dirt path coming from the Silvano estate. Gianna was late. Where was she?

He fretted and paced, lost in thought. As Gianna's fiancé, Silvano would have to promote him to the foreman's job his father formerly held. He vowed to work hard to give Gianna the fine things she deserved.

Sweet honeysuckle in a nearby field softened the stench of fertilizer. This was home, where he belonged, not in Napoli protecting merchandise.

He heard footsteps and turned quickly. "Signor Silvano!" Nicola stiffened seeing his boss.

"You were expecting Gianna?" The sarcastic tone startled Nicola.

"How did...?"

"That's not important. If you come near my daughter again, I'll kill you!"

Nicola gulped. "But we're in love."

"I ought to murder you here and now." Silvano lunged at Nicola with outstretched arms. He tightened his hands around Nicola's neck, choking him.

Nicola shoved Silvano back.

Silvano stopped. "I didn't work this hard to have Gianna end up with some peasant. I have plans for her."

"But..."

He shoved his finger into Nicola's chest as though it was the barrel of a pistol. "But nothing, you little bastard. I spoke with your uncle earlier. I'll give your family money to move. You'll have to find work elsewhere."

Nicola's head spun. How could Silvano treat him this way? His father had spent most of his life on this vineyard. "I don't understand. I want to marry your daughter."

Signor Silvano laughed. His expression turned threatening. "I won't

allow it! Get out of my sight! If you come near her or our house again, I'll slit your throat." Silvano wiped sweat from his bald head with a handkerchief.

"*Per favore, Signor.* Let me see Gianna." Begging was his last resort. He felt his dreams being ripped apart like a plow tearing through soil. How could this man be so cruel?

"Go before I change my mind about helping your family at all." He shook his finger at Nicola. "The only reason I'm doing anything is because I respected your father—a man who knew his place in the world. I can see you've learned nothing from him."

Nicola clenched his fists. Gianna's face flashed before him. He knew if he hit her father, he'd never see her again. The enormity of what had just transpired was overwhelming, but he forced himself to walk away. He vowed to see Gianna before he left for Napoli.

Nicola opened the door to the cottage. A commotion drew him to his parents' room.

His sister hugged him. "Nicola, Papa's gone."

He let her nest her head against his shoulder and patted her back. A devastating sense of loss overcame him. His eyes flooded with tears. Comforting words eluded him. He'd just lost Gianna and now, his dear father.

His mother and uncle sat on opposite ends of his father's bed, reciting the Our Father.

When they finished praying, his mother kissed his father's forehead and stood, wiping her damp eyes with her lacy handkerchief.

"*Mi familia.*" She held out her arms. Nicola and Eleonora rushed to their mother's side. After a few minutes, Alessandra straightened and smoothed her skirt. "It's time for us to be brave. Uncle Carmine will make the funeral arrangements. We have to prepare the living room for the wake. Come, Eleonora, there's much to do."

After the women left, Nicola looked to his uncle.

"*Mi scusi, Nicola.* I know your father wanted the best for you. We'll write the funeral notices. I'll post them around town."

On plain paper, they wrote the words—*Si e spento serenamente oggi. He has serenely gone out like a candle today.* Carmine scripted the date as well as the time of the funeral.

"Uncle Carmine, did you talk with Signor Silvano today?"

"*Si.* Your mother asked me to speak to him. He said one of his men saw you and Gianna making love. When he confronted her, she confessed she was in love with you." Carmine shook his head. "He was so angry, he sent the girl to Paris with her mother." The priest looked into his nephew's eyes. "Nicola, how could you let lust endanger your family?"

"It wasn't lust. I love her." Nicola bowed his head.

“It’s a sin, Nicola. You’ll have to go to confession.”

Confession—the family’s answer to all their problems. He wasn’t sure he believed in any of it anymore, but dared not say it out loud. “Is Gianna really in Paris?”

“They left yesterday. Gianna is to marry someone else.”

Nicola’s mouth went dry. The statement smarted like a bee’s sting. “Who?”

“Signor Silvano didn’t say. It doesn’t matter. He’s forcing your family to move even though I told him you were leaving for Napoli. He’s determined to seek vengeance. I couldn’t even convince him to let your mother and sister stay.”

“I don’t know what to say, Uncle. I love Gianna and want to marry her.”

“The matter seems settled. The quicker you leave town, the easier it will be on your mother and sister.” Carmine patted Nicola’s shoulder to soften the blow.

Why did it have to be this way? He loved and respected Gianna. His marriage proposal was legitimate.

As a child, Nicola remembered playing in Gianna’s house, wandering through rooms with chairs and sofas upholstered in velvet, intricately carved vases, and wall paintings. He’d stare at those pictures in awe of the beautiful scenes. Compared to his family’s threadbare sofa, wobbly kitchen table, and small, iron-posted beds, Gianna’s home seemed like a palace. Still, he considered the Silvanos family even though his father had always reminded him otherwise.

“I have to see Gianna,” he said.

The priest looked straight into his nephew’s eyes. “Nicola, forget Gianna. Didn’t you hear me? She’s in Paris and is to marry someone else. You’re not going to see her. Look, sometimes God has a plan for us that we just don’t understand. I think His plan for you is to find your way in Napoli. Your sister and mother need you.”

Frustrated and sick of duty, he had to do what was best for his family. Later, he’d find Gianna.

The clanging of bells hanging by the front door woke Nicola. Welcoming sunshine streamed in through the open window and he rubbed sleep from his eyes. He heard his mother thank a caller. The Romolos had lived around Montepulciano for many years, and it didn’t take long for relatives and friends to send food and flowers. Nicola lay back on the pillow. He’d woken several times in the night, thinking of his father. The realization he’d never see him again filled Nicola with despair, bringing tears to his eyes. There was much to do, but he allowed himself a moment to grieve.

Nuns from the church came to the house last night to prepare

Edmondo for burial. They dressed him in his dark blue suit, threadbare and ill-fitting after weeks of illness.

A close family friend, Nestore, delivered a plain pine box. His mother covered two sawhorses with white linen cloths before the coffin was set on them. On a table beside the coffin, tiny votive lights in blue and green glass containers glowed beneath a picture of Edmondo. After Alessandra approved the setting, the family said the rosary before going to bed.

Nicola heard his Aunt Felicita come in. "Oh, dear God. I can't believe my precious brother is in heaven."

"Come," his mother said. "I'll fix you some coffee."

With his mother occupied, he laid back, turning his thoughts to Gianna. Her lavender and honey scent, golden-brown hair, and almond-shaped eyes lingered as a painful yet happy memory. She stood barely to his shoulder, the fragility of her tiny bones roused protective and loving feelings. Why couldn't they be together? Was he being punished for the sin of lust? But it wasn't lust in his mind. He truly loved Gianna and would protect her with his life. It didn't matter now. She was somewhere in Paris, and only God knew if and when she would return. Nicola suspected it would be long after he'd left town.

He walked through the living room after he'd finished dressing and saw his father's body surrounded by red geraniums and pink and white bindweed. Their slight almond scent tickled his nose. An olive branch wreath, secured by wire, dangled on the coffin's edge. The window's worn lace curtains drifted in and out in the cool morning breeze.

He stopped at the kitchen door when he heard his aunt say. "Did Edmondo give Nicola the medallion?"

"I don't know," his mother replied. "Besides it's a hoax. After all these years, we need to forget about it. It can only bring trouble."

"More trouble than we already have? The medallion is your only hope. You must speak with Nicola."

When they saw Nicola, they stopped talking. He wanted to tell his aunt he had the medallion, but decided to say nothing.

His mother looked up at him. "Were you able to sleep, my son?"

"A little." Nicola grabbed a roll from a nearby plate. Alessandra poured some warm milk into a cup of coffee and handed it to him.

"Nicola, your father was such a loving man. I know how much you'll miss him." His aunt burst into tears.

"*Tsk*. Maybe, you should lie down, Felicita." His mother pursed her lips. She'd controlled her emotions and expected everyone around her to do the same.

With red swollen eyes, Felicita walked to Eleonora's room.

"There's some fruit, if you want more. The neighbors brought this for us." His mother pointed to a bowl of strawberries and bananas. She sneezed and wiped her nose with a handkerchief then faced a statue of

Saint Blaise, crossed herself, and took a sip of her own special blend of herbed tea, the cure-all for any ills plaguing the Romolos.

"Mama, Uncle Carmine talked with Signor Silvano. The signor is angry that I was with Gianna."

"My son, what's done is done. It's time to think about other things." She went to work on a sink full of dirty dishes.

"*Mi scusi.*"

Eleonora came in. "Sorry for what?"

Alessandra looked at her children and with a sharp edge to her voice, said, "It's over and done with, and we won't talk about it again."

Nicola and Eleonora shared glances, knowing better than to defy their mother's wishes, particularly today.

"Eleonora, I want you to press your clothes before the family comes this afternoon."

"*Si, Mama.*" She walked away, but not before throwing a questioning look at Nicola.

"Nicola, stay away from Signor Silvano. I hope you've learned your lesson. I know you've always thought of them as family, but they're not. They're different from us." His mother dried her hands on a threadbare linen towel.

"Mama, I said I'm..."

She held up her hand. "We won't speak of this again." She left to answer the door.

Nicola finished his coffee. Shame and anger washed over him. Now he'd have to spend his life supporting his sister and mother instead of making wine.

Eleonora came back into the kitchen. "Nicola," she whispered, motioning him out the back door. They walked a short distance from the cottage. "What was that all about?"

"Eleonora, you're too young. You wouldn't understand."

She tossed her hair back. "It's about Gianna, isn't it?"

Nicola looked into her expressive eyes. "What do you know?"

"Are you kidding? Everyone's been gossiping for weeks. After I heard the rumors, I followed you one night."

"You followed me?" Nicola's eyes grew wide.

"I wanted to see for myself."

"And you never told anyone?"

"Why should I? I'm sixteen. I believe in love, too, you know."

She sounded so grown up. "Did you ever talk with Gianna?"

"*Naturalmente*, but not about you."

"Did you know she was in Paris?"

"No. Is she? Nicola, what're you going to do?"

"For now, nothing." He walked away, feeling defeated.

The melodious sound of raindrops on the tile roof woke Nicola. He pulled the threadbare blanket tighter, not wanting to leave its comfort, but today was his father's funeral. He dressed and found Eleonora in the kitchen.

"Nicola, Mama needs you to help the men carry Papa's coffin to the cart. Hurry, they're outside waiting."

Nicola gulped his coffee. Ignoring his growling stomach, he rushed out. Uncle Carmine, and Nestore and his son Stefano, dis-cussed how to get the casket into the cart. Nestore and Stefano toiled in the vineyard with him. Usually wearing work clothes, they looked uncomfortable in dress shirts. An enclosed carriage parked beside the cart stood ready to take the family to church.

Uncle Carmine took his mother's hand. "I'm sorry, Alessandra. Since it's raining, we'll have to close the casket."

Alessandra's voice cracked. "It's tradition. Can't we wait a little longer?"

"Look at the sky," Nestore said. "The funeral is in half an hour."

Nicola wrapped his arm around his mother. "*Va bene*, Mama. Papa would've wanted it this way."

His mother fell against him. The lines around her mouth creased as she considered a solution. Finally, she pulled a handkerchief and wiped her face. "Okay," she whispered. "Nicola, help them."

Inside, Alessandra said. "Eleonora, Nicola." She kissed her husband's forehead and motioned her children to do the same. Eleonora cried. Nicola felt the icy coldness of his father's skin. He swallowed his tears.

Alessandra nodded. Edmondo's face disappeared under the coffin's protective cover. The men carried the coffin outside, gently lowering it onto the horse-drawn cart. The family held hands, watching as Nestore drove away, Uncle Carmine seated beside him.

"When you're ready," Stefano said.

The women and Nicola went inside. Alessandra and Eleonora donned their black veils. Nicola straightened his tie and buttoned his suit coat. They joined Stefano. Mercifully, it had stopped raining.

Twenty minutes later, they stood beside the coffin ready to lead the procession into the church. Nicola stared at the delicately carved statue of San Biagio and remembered he was supposed to save people from the diseases of the throat and lungs, but prayers to the saint hadn't spared his father.

Verdi's *Requiem* played as Nicola took his mother's arm, guiding her to the front pew. Pallbearers, hired by the Silvanos out of respect for Edmondo, set the pine box onto a table draped with a white cloth. In unison, the men ceremoniously stretched a lacey linen cloth over the

coffin, placing an olive branch wreath entwined with roses on top. Finally, they put two urns filled with red geraniums on either side of the table.

The music stopped. Carmine sprinkled holy water around the casket then waved a gold incense burner. Nicola blinked. The sticky sweet odor irritated his eyes.

His uncle chanted to the heavenly saints. At the mention of St. Catherine, whose image appeared on the medallion, Nicola straight-ened. Would it be proper to ask her help to find the other half? Deciding there'd be no harm, Nicola said a quick prayer and crossed himself as Carmine began mass.

The mass often bored him, but today the ritual brought comfort. He stared at the coffin, while repeating the intercessions, *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.*

What would his father have said about Gianna? Probably, Nicola guessed, that poor Italians should marry their own kind.

Nicola bowed his head. He'd disappointed his family. His shame turned to guilt.

When mass concluded, the pallbearers carried the casket outside. The sun broke through the clouds. Nicola looked up, remembering his father's look of approval whenever Nicola had done something to please him.

At the cemetery, the family stood around the grave as Carmine beseeched God to forgive Edmondo's sins. They recited the *Our Father*. His mother and sister threw a rose on top of the casket. When he saw his sister and mother sobbing, he lost control and cried with them.

The short ceremony ended. Family and friends gathered at the Romolo house for a lunch of ravioli filled with spinach. Nicola, now head of the family, stood and raised his glass. "May we always remember my father as a good man."

Everyone clinked glasses and said, "*Salute.*" The usual merriment that accompanied most family gatherings wasn't there today. Nicola sighed with relief when everyone left.

"Nicola," Carmine said. "I've arranged for us to leave tomorrow at seven. Meet me at the church just before six."

Reluctantly, he agreed. His mother pulled out her rosary beads and asked Carmine to lead them in prayer. Having had enough prayers and mourning for one day, Nicola now looked forward to leaving. He was already sick of the somberness that had settled like dust. As was the custom, his mother and sister would wear black dresses for one year—a constant reminder of their loss.

Suddenly Nicola thought of a way to contact Gianna. After prayers, he went to his room to pen a letter. When finished, he knocked on Eleonora's bedroom door.

She cracked it open, rubbing her eyes. “Nicola, what is it?” She pulled him in. “You’ll wake Mama.”

“I want you to do something for me. The next time you see Gianna, give this to her.”

“But...”

“*Per favore*, Eleonora, just do it. For me?”

“*Va bene*.” She took the letter. “Do you want me to tell her where you are?”

“It’s all in there. Just give it to her.”

He left his sister, worried she’d say something to their mother.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The waiter set Gianna's breakfast plate down as Signora Silvano asked him to pull the gold-colored drapery cord. Instantly, morning light flooded the room. Gianna would have preferred eating breakfast in the main dining room, but her mother couldn't tolerate going anywhere before noon, claiming her dizziness prevented it. As a child, Gianna had thought her mother was sick. Now, she knew it was the older woman's way of getting what she wanted.

The waiter poured coffee. He took the lid off a platter of breakfast rolls and croissants and moved them to one side of the table. The slight scent of warm dough rose. A tiny silver bowl filled with rasp-berry jam sat near a matching creamer. A bowl of fruit made up the center of the table. He unfurled napkins that held more silverware than they needed.

"Will there be anything else, Madame?"

"*Non, merci*," Consuella said. She waved her hand, dismissing him.

The waiter bowed and left.

"Did you sleep well, Gianna?"

"No, I had some cramps last night." Gianna sighed, toying with a croissant. She pulled it apart, smothering half with strawberry jam. Since age fourteen, her monthly cycles had been accompanied by pain.

"Are you having your period now?"

"No, it's not really due for another two weeks." She pushed a few wavy curls away from her face.

"Dr. Brazzi always said you needed more rest. You shouldn't go bicycling. That's the problem. Rest more and the pain will ease."

"But, Mother, it's all the rage. I feel better when I exercise." She liked doing things away from her mother's watchful eye, but said nothing for fear of insulting her.

"See where it got you?"

Gianna groaned. Arguing with either of her parents was pointless, although she dared be a little bolder with her mother.

Her mother eyed her. "Are you too ill for shopping today?"

"No. Where are we going?"

"We have a fitting for your wedding dress scheduled this afternoon."

Gianna grimaced, hating how her parents were forcing her into marriage. She didn't want a wedding dress and had no interest in marrying a man she didn't love. "I'm not ready to marry Santino."

“You have no choice, my dear. Your father has arranged it. All you need do is buy a dress and your trousseau. Now come on, smile. You know how much you love new clothes.”

Normally, her mother was right. But she didn't want new clothes. Instead, she yearned for the one man who made her feel special—Nicola. Gianna couldn't imagine Santino Callisto as her husband. He was cold, distant, and smelled musty. He never talked much to her and treated her like she was some object he could take off the shelf and play with at his whim. No, she longed to marry Nicola who made her feel as beautiful as a sunrise.

Outside the Hotel Louvre's window, she saw the massive building's façade. The streets of Paris bustled with pedestrians: walking their dogs, pushing baby carriages, meandering under broad parasols.

Yesterday, they'd explored the Louvre, moving from room to room. Her mother had talked about Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and other Italian artists, requiring Gianna to read their biographies. Why couldn't they just stay here for a while?

“Mama, shouldn't you be in love before you marry?”

Her mother stared coldly. “You're very young, but you'll learn quickly. It's time for you to assume your role in life.”

“I'm eighteen. Whatever happened to love? It's alive in poetry and art.”

“You're right, daughter. Poetry and art do speak of love, but it's fiction for our entertainment. You'll have children who will someday take over the vineyard and help our family prosper. As long as you do what you're supposed to, you'll be taken care of without any problems.”

Her mother emphasized *problems*. Was she merely a problem for her parents to resolve? Gianna respected her parents and usually obeyed them without question. But when it came to Nicola, all reason left her. She hadn't been surprised when her father told her it was time for her to marry Santino. Gianna had never spoken to Nicola of her betrothal to Santino; she'd been promised to him from the time she turned thirteen. He'd even given her an engagement ring, but her mother had kept it for her. Now it was on her finger. Gianna had hoped her father would change his mind about this arranged marriage and allow her to marry, Nicola, the man she loved.

The thought of being intimate with Santino sent shivers down her spine. With all her heart, she prayed something would prevent the marriage. She mulled this over as she ate strawberries. Suddenly, it came to her—maybe she was pregnant. Surely she realized Santino wouldn't marry her if she carried another man's child. The notion excited her. She'd wait and hope her monthly bleeding didn't start. Then, she'd tell Santino. With her engagement called off, her father would have no choice but to let her marry Nicola.

She sipped coffee as her mother flipped through the pages of *La Nouvelle Mode*, looking at the latest wedding dresses and how styles had changed from the stuffy Victorian to the sleeker Edwardian. She admired models with their hair coiffed in the latest Gibson Girl chignon; she'd copied the style in her own hair. She looked up from the magazine wondering what would become of Nicola. She'd heard a rumor her father was forcing his family to leave, but she dared not ask.

She stared out the window, her feelings scattered like so many pieces of a puzzle. She remembered the one delicious hour she'd spent making love to Nicola. The sensations she'd experienced shocked her. She knew the mechanics of lovemaking, but not the pleasure. What did it matter now? She was stuck marrying a man she didn't love, all to unite two vineyards she cared nothing about.

Suddenly, she thought herself selfish. Her parents had seen to her every need and given her almost anything she wanted. Gianna had no idea how to take care of herself, which frightened and confused her. Young girls lived with their families until they married, then often lived nearby afterward. Why did one's life have to revolve around family?

Oh how she missed Nicola, and his delicious stolen kisses and strong, muscular body wrapped around her. She could still smell the scent of olive oil on his skin, and with breasts aching, she longed for his touch.

"Finish eating," her mother said. "Your French instructor will be here soon."

"*Si, Mama.*" Was it possible to be pregnant after one coupling? She wished there were someone to speak to about this. More than anything, she wanted to speak to Nicola.

As her mother continued to turn pages, Gianna decided to risk getting a message to Nicola.

Ricardo Silvano paced in his vineyard, as the scorching sun penetrated a cloudless sky. He wiped his face with his white handkerchief and headed for the shade of an olive tree. Here, he could think undisturbed. He missed his wife, Consuella, and his beautiful daughter, Gianna, who'd inherited his dark brown, almond-shaped eyes and the thick, curly hair of his youth. He'd hated sending them to Paris, but his daughter's escapades had left him little choice. After discovering she and Nicola had been seen making love, he wanted to kill Romolo. Instead, he'd spoken with Mario Callisto, Santino's father, convincing him it was time to announce the engagement between Santino and Gianna. He'd been surprised when Callisto agreed.

Gianna's marriage to Callisto would secure Ricardo's dream of holding onto the vineyard his father had started. Seven years ago, his vines had been plagued with phyloxera. The dreaded disease had almost wiped out his whole vineyard. Callisto had given him some American

rootstock, but it had taken three years for his vines to produce again. No wine production had created mounting debts.

The Callistos had lent him the money under the condition Gianna would marry Santino, thus uniting the two largest vineyards in the area. Callisto had even agreed to keep a line of wines bearing the Silvano family label.

Since her thirteenth birthday, he'd told Gianna she'd been promised to the young Callisto. It was her duty, he'd explained, to go through with this marriage. He wanted his daughter to be happy and Callisto could give her a beautiful home, fine clothes, and security. The Callistos like the Silvanos were members of the Nobili, the upper class of Italy. This marriage would provide Gianna and his future grandchildren guaranteed wealth, something he wasn't able to endow because of the years his vineyard hadn't yielded enough wine to support itself.

When Lorenzo announced he'd seen Nicola making love to Gianna, Silvano had been stunned. He'd heard the rumors about Gianna and Nicola meeting in the vineyard, and he'd admonished his daughter many times, reminding her she belonged to someone else. Until Lorenzo mentioned seeing Nicola and Gianna together, Silvano had trusted his daughter who'd promised to stop seeing Nicola. He just hoped, for all their sakes, she hadn't conceived a child—his main reason for wanting to go through with the planned wedding now.

Silvano had to ensure that his vineyard would continue and the deal with Callisto sealed the legacy. Now that Gianna was engaged, all seemed back to normal. European markets were developing an appetite for fine Italian wines. It was only a matter of time before America became an important market, too.

Ricardo believed the only way to keep Nicola away from his daughter was to force the Romolos to move. Edmondo had been a good employee, and Ricardo knew he would not have approved of his son's actions. Silvano felt a pang of guilt, but it no longer mattered. Edmondo was dead. He'd given Edmondo's widow enough money to move, and according to Carmine, Nicola had a job in Napoli.

Later today, he'd meet with the Callistos to make the final wedding arrangements. He felt sure Gianna would eventually see the wisdom of this marriage. Although his daughter's contentment was important to him, the future of their vineyard was his biggest concern.

In the early morning light, Nicola and his uncle stood in the busy train station in Florence. It had taken them a week to get this far since they traveled sometimes by donkey cart and sometimes on foot, resting in various parish rectories along the way. Relief swept over Nicola when he heard the train's whistle.

The unbearable grief of Edmondo's funeral had been etched in his

mother's face and in his sister's tears. Nicola hated the feelings of helplessness he experienced whenever a woman cried. He stifled his own tears, knowing men had to be strong. But his strength was being tested. Becoming the head of the family and having to assume responsibility for his mother and sister was overwhelming. He might have been happier released from the burden of this passage into adulthood.

Nicola and his uncle boarded the train and settled onto an uncomfortable wooden bench in a crowded car. He put his father's well-worn suitcase into the overhead bin and sat nearest to the aisle. The conductor stamped their tickets. Soon the giant steam engine bellowed, and the train lurched forward.

As it picked up speed, Nicola patted his jacket pocket, making sure the red velvet case was there. Carmine read a prayer book with thick reading glasses perched on his nose. His body bounced with the train's rhythmic movements.

Nicola cleared his throat. "Uncle?"

Carmine put his book aside. "Yes?"

"My father gave me something before he died." Nicola feared he'd broken his father's trust since Edmondo had said to tell no one.

The priest shot him a strange look. "Are you talking about the medallion?"

"You know about it?"

"Your father mentioned the medallion to me shortly after he married your mother. When you were born, he said the medallion would become yours someday."

"So it's valuable?"

Carmine shrugged. "Edmondo thought your grandfather had owned some land."

"Did he ever show it to you?"

"No. I think your father's stories were just family legend and nothing to do with reality. You have it?"

"Yes."

"Treasure it as part of who your father was."

"But he told me to find the other half."

"I wouldn't waste my time. I'd be surprised if it exists." Carmine picked up his prayer book again.

Out the window, fields with crops, vineyards, and flaming red poppies floated by. Nicola closed his eyes, astonished as he'd believed the medal valuable, and he wondered about the land his uncle had just mentioned. As soon as he saved enough money, he'd return home to find the truth about the medallion. It was the only way he could win Gianna.

Just past the town of Formia on the Tyrrhenian coast, Nicola caught a glimpse of the sky blue Mediterranean. He'd read that Formia was situated on the Appian Way, an important Roman route. The village had

been a vacation spot for Roman aristocrats. Cicero, the great Roman orator who opposed Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, was buried there.

They arrived in Napoli at noon just as the outdoor market was at its peak, forcing them to elbow their way through the crowded platform.

"Come, this way. It's just a few blocks to the church," Carmine said.

Nicola's stomach growled, but he didn't complain. The smell of unwashed bodies, urine, and roasting chickens hung in the warm air. Hordes congregated along crowded sidewalks, scrutinizing the market's offerings. Excited chatter rang out. Vendors held up oranges, lemons, tomatoes, and jugs of wine. Plucked chickens, sausages, and slabs of bloodied pork hung above stalls. Wedges of Parmigiano and Pecorino cheeses, freshly baked bread, and bins of olives sat on long wooden tables. Horses' hooves clattered along the street, the noise mingling with excited voices.

Across the street, merchants hawked cloth swatches, hats, and shoes to the swirling throng, forcing Carmine and Nicola to walk sideways until Carmine led them to an open square. "This is Piazza Plebiscito." He pointed across the way. "There is my church, San Francesco di Paola. Come, down this alleyway."

Nicola's eyes watered as he stepped gingerly, avoiding the slimy brown standing water that came from emptied chamber pots.

An enclosed tiled walkway led from the church to the rectory. When Carmine opened the kitchen door, an olfactory feast of stewing tomatoes and garlic greeted them, banishing the odor from the alleyway.

"Ah, Father Gavino." A stout woman wiped her hands on her apron then stretched out her arms. "This must be your nephew."

"Signora Luciana, meet Nicola Romolo."

She kissed his cheeks. "I have your lunch ready, Father, but first, I will show Nicola his room."

"Very well," Carmine said. "Nicola, we'll eat after you're settled."

Nicola nodded, following the woman up the creaky, spotless stairwell. Her matter-of-fact tone reminded him of his mother. Past a number of closed doors, at the end of the hallway she stopped and opened one. "This is the bathroom."

The spartan room held a claw-foot tub, a sink, and a toilet. She closed the door. In the next room, a single bed with an iron headboard was covered with a white bedspread. It took up most of the space. A thin pillow broke its straight lines. A three-drawer pine dresser and a matching desk completed the furnishings. A crucifix hung over the bed.

The housekeeper pointed to the dresser. "I cleaned out the drawers, except for a towel. If you need anything, just let me know."

She smiled, revealing rotten brown teeth. "Breakfast is at seven, lunch at one, and dinner at eight-thirty. If you want a packed lunch, tell me the night before. Bring your dirty laundry to the kitchen each

morning, and I'll take care of it." She left before he had a chance to thank her.

Nicola set his bag on the bed and looked through the age-yellowed curtains. He opened the window, but when the alley's foul smell wafted in, he quickly closed it.

He put his clothes in the drawers, and picked up the red velvet case containing the medallion, burying it below his shirts.

Nicola went to the bathroom to wash his hands.

"You must be Nicola."

He jumped and turned and came face-to-face with a man with thick, gray, neatly combed hair who teetered in the doorway, reeking of alcohol.

"Yes," Nicola said.

"I'm Padre Grimaldo. Welcome to Napoli."

Nicola shook his unsteady hand.

"Carmine told us you were coming. What do you think of our beautiful city so far?" He slurred his words and wobbled as though a mild breeze might blow him over.

"I saw only a little of it when I arrived this morning. It seems all right."

"You'll take to it well enough. Are you going down for lunch?"

"Yes." Nicola was starving.

Signora Luciana scurried about the kitchen. The table, set for three, had at its center, a bowl of fruit, a plate of grated cheese, a breadbasket, and a pitcher of olive oil. Small tumblers filled with red wine were placed near each plate.

Carmine sat at the head and pointed at a chair to his right. "Sit here. I see you met Father Grimaldo. Did you get settled okay?"

Nicola nodded. "Yes, the room's fine."

The housekeeper put down a large platter with thin slices of salami and another with cut tomatoes and a watery cheese.

The men bowed and said grace.

"You'll be comfortable here." Carmine tore a slice of bread from the warm fragrant loaf, passed the basket to Father Grimaldo, then to Nicola.

"This is *mozzarella di bufala* made fresh this morning," Grimaldo explained.

Nicola thought the cheese, a specialty of Napoli, delicious. Next, the housekeeper placed plates with steaming pasta topped with tomato sauce in front of each man. Then they dug into a bowl of mussels and devoured them.

Nicola sipped some wine. "This is a marvelous meal."

"Signora Luciana is a great cook." Father Grimaldo leaned forward as if revealing a precious secret. "She's my sister-in-law."

Carmine ate, ignoring the conversation.

"Her husband died ten years ago. I gave her this job to help her out."

His voice was filled with pride as though he'd saved the woman from death.

Nicola nodded, more focused on the meal than the story.

"When we're finished, we'll go meet Signor Amato," Carmine said. "He'll show you around and tell you what he wants you to do."

Nicola nodded. He looked forward to meeting Amato.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

At one-thirty, a doorman escorted Gianna and her mother into Madame Beaumont's private bridal salon. The luxurious circular room held a settee and several matching chairs all upholstered in red velvet brocade. The doorman seated them, explaining that the shop owner would soon be out.

A silver coffee service along with a platter of cookies sat atop a white coffee table. Nearby, a floor to ceiling mirror was anchored on top of three carpeted steps. After a few moments, Madame Beaumont entered.

"You must be Madame Silvano." She greeted them in Italian. "I'm very pleased to meet you. And you're the bride!" She air kissed Gianna.

Gianna stiffened. Why was she in this stuffy shop buying a wedding dress? She would have preferred riding a bicycle, feeling the warmth of the spring sun on her face.

The dress shop owner pointed to the coffee table. "Now, Madame, help yourself to the coffee. I'll get your lovely daughter ready."

Her mother nodded.

Gianna followed Madame Beaumont to a dressing room. Several wedding dresses hung on satin hangers.

"This is Danielle. She will help you dress. Your mother called ahead and told me you were a petite size and liked lots of lace."

Danielle took one of the dresses off a hanger.

"Why don't you start with this one," Madame Beaumont said. "When you're ready, just go through there so you can show your mother. You'll make a beautiful bride!"

Danielle helped Gianna out of her dress and slid the gown over her shoulders. Facing a mirror, Danielle straightened the sleeves and the skirt. It was the right size, but Gianna hated it. The lace bodice made her ample bosom look twice as big, and the skirt widened her hips. She wanted something plainer, simpler. Where had her mother gotten the idea she liked lace?

Disgusted, she tried the next one. The plainer bodice fit better, but she didn't like the geometric wave-like pattern. Knowing her mother's lack of patience, she went out to the viewing room.

Madame Beaumont jumped up. "Oh, how beautiful." She smoothed the skirt of the dress and adjusted the bodice. "This fits perfectly." She stepped aside and motioned for Gianna to twirl around so her mother

could see the back of the dress. “We have a wide selection of veils, trains, and accoutrements.”

Her mother winced and shook her head. “No. That’s not you, dear. Too plain. It doesn’t have the right flair. This is your wedding day after all.”

Gianna stomped her foot, wanting to pick her own wedding dress, but seeing her mother’s pursed lips, she slipped back into the dressing room, understanding her mother would have the final say.

After lunch, Nicola and his uncle walked through town. Market vendors cleared goods from tables and loaded them onto waiting horse-drawn carts. The morning bustle dwindled. Market was over.

“This way.” His uncle veered into another alley.

Nicola tried to memorize street signs. They headed toward the sea and felt the cool breeze from the bay.

“This is *Santa Lucia*, not the safest section of town. Women walk without their wedding bands, fearing thieves. That’s the *Castel dell’-Ovo*.” His uncle pointed to a large castle on the shore. “Supposedly, Virgil, the great Latin poet, buried a magic egg there. If the egg is broken, bad luck will befall the city.”

Nicola raised an eyebrow. “Is this true?”

“It’s a legend about the fragility of the city.” Carmine pointed to Vesuvius. “Even now the citizens of Napoli fear the evil volcano.”

The men moved on. The sun was warm and welcoming. Along the expansive boardwalk, they stopped in front of a shop, the windows displaying women’s hats and shoes. Inside, a short round man with a balding head came forward.

“Father, it’s always a pleasure.” The men shook hands.

“This is my nephew, Nicola, signor.” He turned to Nicola. “Signor Amato.”

After pumping his hand, Amato said, “You’re very strong. A good sign.”

“I’ll leave you with Signor Amato,” Carmine said to Nicola.

“Father, you must join us for lunch. Perhaps on Sunday?”

“I’d be honored.” The priest bowed and left.

Hats, purses, shoes, gloves in various shapes, sizes, and colors crowded the shop. The merchandise lent a claustrophobic feel. Nicola was unsure where to turn.

Amato motioned behind a counter that held a cash register. He smelled of garlic and tomatoes. Green remnants of his earlier lunch were stuck between his teeth. “So, Nicola, you like our beautiful city?”

“Yes, from what I’ve seen.”

The door opened, and two women entered.

“Ah, Maria, Francesca, come, meet Nicola.” He turned to Nicola.

“This is my wife, Signora Amato, and my daughter, Maria.” Everyone shook hands.

“I need to take care of business with Nicola. Are you all set, my dear?”

“You go on,” Francesca said. “Maria and I will see to the shop.”

Nicola followed Amato out the door. “We’ll start out slowly. It’s important you follow the same route every day. Young hoods steal goods from our fine merchants. We offer protection—for a fee, of course. Your job is to collect the fees.”

Nicola wanted to ask who provided the protection, but Amato’s chattering didn’t offer an opportunity.

Amato led Nicola through parallel alleys. They stopped first at a bakery, then a butcher shop, a small grocery store, a women’s dress shop, and finally, an apothecary. Amato introduced Nicola, explaining to the owners that Nicola would be taking his place. Each merchant welcomed him. He memorized names by associating it with the business. Before they left each place, the owner handed over a few bills to Amato who pocketed it. Nicola wondered how much Amato received, but decided to ask later.

By five, they’d finished and headed back to Amato’s shop. He ushered Nicola to a back room, taking the roll of bills from his pocket. “Each store owner pays a thousand lire. That was Wednesday’s route. Come back tomorrow, and I’ll show you Thursday’s route.”

Nicola’s head swam at the amount of money he and Amato had collected since his family spent that much on food every three or four months.

Amato counted the bills twice. He slid the money into an envelope, locking it in the top desk drawer. “After you finish the route, bring the money back to me. I’ll see that it’s handed over.”

Handed over? To whom?

“Come with your uncle on Sunday for lunch.” Amato stood.

“*Si. Gracis*,” Nicola said. He had no desire to eat lunch with his boss, but didn’t want to appear rude.

“Be here at ten tomorrow morning.” Amato ushered him out the door.

As Nicola headed back to the rectory, he thought of Gianna, remembering her long silky hair and how it tickled his neck when they embraced. Oh how he missed her! He longed to hold her delicate body and caress the smooth skin on her arms.

The rectory seemed deserted when Nicola entered. No sign of Signora Luciana or his uncle. He climbed the stairs. Nicola stopped cold when he heard a woman’s moan coming from Father Grimaldo’s room. Thinking he’d misheard, he stood by the door, but after a few minutes a rhythmic bounce of bedsprings was followed by a man’s grunts. These

were the same noises he'd often heard coming from his parents' bedroom—sounds of lovemaking. Who could be in there? Surely not Father Grimaldo?

*What should I do?*

No one answered when he tapped on his uncle's door. He tried the knob; the door was locked. He'd speak with his uncle later.

In his room, lying on the bed, pangs of fear and loneliness clung to him like a wet shirt.

Gianna woke late and found her mother eating breakfast. After three weeks, she was growing tired of Paris.

"You're looking pale this morning. Are you all right?" Her mother put down her coffee cup and magazine.

"I'm fine, just a little tired." Gianna sat and picked at a croissant. She hadn't slept well again. Her flow was a week late, not unusual for her.

"Madame Beaumont is delivering your wedding dress this morn-ing. If you don't need any other fittings, we'll be leaving tomorrow."

"We're going home?"

"Yes, your father sent a telegram. He needs me to finish the wedding plans."

"Oh." Gianna put the croissant down, her appetite gone. Since her mother had made all the wedding plans and seen to every detail, it had become her day, leaving Gianna as an actress awaiting her mother's cue to perform.

The wedding would take place at *Cathedrale di Santa Maria* in the Piazza Grande, the church where she'd been baptized. Every Sunday, for as long as she could remember, her family had climbed the steep hill to the village of Montepulciano to attend mass. As a child, she'd admired the large Assumption of Mary portrait that was over five hundred years old. Mary had conceived the child Jesus out of wedlock. The Lord's angel had told her not to worry because he would send the Holy Spirit to assure Joseph she was still a virgin. Gianna hung her head in shame. What if she were pregnant? No angel would appear to help her.

The rules of her faith didn't permit one to receive a sacrament like marriage while in the state of sin. Making love outside of marriage was a sin and rightfully, she would have to confess before her marriage. Even though what was said in the confessional was private, she was concerned the priest would say something to her parents and if he did, she'd bring shame on her family.

"What about the banns?"

Notices were posted on a public bulletin board for three weeks prior to the wedding to give anyone an opportunity to object to the marriage. Usually that only happened if the bride or groom were married to someone else or had openly had an affair.

“Your father took care of that. The first will be posted this Sunday. Is there a problem you want to tell me about?”

She studied her mother’s face. Did she know Gianna’s secret? “No, of course not.”

“That means the wedding will be in three weeks?”

“It’s planned at month’s end. Just get used to it.”

“But, Mother...”

Her mother’s look told her she had no choice. Frustrated, Gianna smeared a croissant with strawberry jam. If she were pregnant, Santino Callisto wouldn’t marry her. But to prove it she’d have to see a doctor. Since her only symptom was a late period, she’d have to be patient awhile longer.

Dread and hopelessness overwhelmed her. She couldn’t imagine herself walking through the village, arm-in-arm with Santino, as she’d seen other brides do. Nor could she envision the reception slated to be held in her parent’s back garden. She didn’t even know what was to be served at the wedding luncheon nor did she care.

Her mother answered a knock at the door.

“Good morning, Madame and Mademoiselle.” Madame Beaumont babbled directions to two younger girls who carried the dress, the veil, and a bag holding accessories. When everything was ready, she turned to Gianna. “Now, Signorina, try it on.”

Wordlessly, Gianna removed her dress, and Madame Beaumont helped her with the hosiery, shoes, and finally the bridal gown. After ten minutes of fussing to get everything just right, Gianna stood in front of a mirror. The dress was the latest spring style with a high lacy neck and long ruffled sleeves giving way to flared cuffs. The bodice had furrows of fabric covered with a sheer material, presenting the illusion of looking through it. The long skirt was fitted in the front and gathered in the back. The satin sash artfully divided the top and bottom of the dress, accenting both. Gianna loved the base of the dress with its multiple layers of ruffles, flaring elegantly into a small train. Her mother and Madame Beaumont had argued vehemently about its lack of a long train, but the dress shop owner was finally able to convince Signora Silvano that the dress was perfect for Gianna’s size and height, stating too long a train would make her look like she was falling forward.

“It’s just beautiful, perfect,” Signora Silvano proclaimed.

Madame Beaumont discussed shipping details. Gianna looked into the eyes of the two young girls who seemed to be staring at her with envy and felt like the lost alley cat, hoping for rescue.

Sunday after mass, Nicola, walking alongside Carmine, dragged his feet through the streets of Napoli to Signor Amato’s house for lunch. All week Amato had sung the praises of his daughter, Maria, and Nicola felt

his boss wanted him to court her.

He hadn't told his uncle about the noises in Father Grimaldo's room, not believing what he'd heard. Besides, the household appeared normal. Father Grimaldo said mass early every morning and then took communion to housebound parishioners. Signora Luciana saw to Nicola's needs with motherly concern that eased his loneliness and longing for his family.

Nicola was at the rectory only for breakfast and dinner since he spent his days with Signor Amato learning the business. At night, he would read or write a letter to his sister and mother. He hadn't heard from Eleonora and wondered if Gianna had returned and whether his sister had been able to get his letter to her.

Families strolled in the mid-day sun dressed in their Sunday finest. People greeted his uncle, but Carmine stopped only long enough to acknowledge them.

Soon they reached Amato's place and climbed the stairs to the apartment located over the millinery. Window-boxes held geraniums blooming in the spring sun. Carmine knocked on the front door.

"*Entri, prego. Come sta.*" Signora Amato ushered them through the small, neat home to the dining room. A red-checkered tablecloth fit the table perfectly. White pasta bowls stood ready for the meal. A large loaf of fragrant bread was at the center of the table, and Maria placed utensils near each plate.

Signor Amato came in. "Father, it's so good of you to come. And of course, Nicola." He put his glass down and shook their hands. "Sambuca?"

"Yes, thank you," his uncle said.

Maria brought the drinks with three coffee beans in the bottom of each glass. She handed Nicola his, not letting go of the glass right away. All week, Maria had shot him glances, although she never said more than *buon giorno* or *come sta*. Tight braids woven into a bun were anchored on the back of her head with combs. A shirt-dress accentuated her ample hips and breasts, but the color, a rosy pink, did nothing for her pale complexion. Compared to Gianna, Maria was dowdy and quite reserved. He felt no attraction.

Amato raised his glass and pointed to the coffee beans. "To your health, wealth, and happiness."

After they all took a sip, Amato turned to Carmine. "Nicola is doing well. He makes a fine courier and already knows most of the routes. The shop's owners seem pleased with him. Before you know it, he'll be taking on more responsibilities."

"I'm so happy," his uncle said. "Nicola, you like your work?"

His opinion was rarely asked so Nicola hesitated before saying, "*Si.*"

With his uncle and Amato deep in conversation, Nicola sat on a

couch, thinking about Gianna, imagining her soft skin and her smooth lips meeting his. How he missed her! The longing never diminished and grew stronger as time went on. He vowed to find a way to see her again.

Amato pointed to an outside window-box. "Maria planted those flowers."

Nicola jumped and felt he had to say something. "They're very nice."

"Lunch is ready." Signora Amato motioned her guests to the table.

Carmine said grace.

Signora Amato passed around a plate of fresh mozzarella and tomatoes drizzled with olive oil followed by a tray of thinly-sliced ham and salami. When they finished the first course, the women cleared the table and served a second course of pasta covered with a fragrant oregano and garlic tomato sauce.

"Maria made the sauce today." Signora Amato announced, pouring Chianti into tumblers.

"It's delicious, daughter," her father said. "You'll make a fine wife." He looked in Nicola's direction.

Carmine nodded. "Yes, your daughter is very gifted."

Maria looked at Nicola, blushing.

Nicola wanted to discourage this talk, but polite words eluded him.

"Maria is also a fine seamstress. She made all these beautiful table linens," Signora Amato said.

Amato wiped his face with his napkin. "Now, Mama. You'll make the girl's head swell."

"I can't help it if we have such a beautiful, talented daughter."

Nicola thought the meal would never end.

## CHAPTER SIX

Knowing her mother was napping and her father off speaking to his foreman, Gianna raced down to the vineyard. Yesterday, while walking about Montepulciano, Eleonora had slipped her a letter. She'd waited all morning for the right opportunity to read it.

In the short conversation with Eleonora, Gianna discovered Nicola's father had died and the family had moved out of their cottage. They now lived in the village with Signora Romolo's sister-in-law. She'd wanted to ask more, but feared being seen with Eleonora.

Brilliant sunshine warmed her face. The pungent scent of fresh herbs melded with the sweet smell of roses growing at the head of each row of grapevines. She ambled between the rows and picked one of the swollen Sangiovese grapes. Their bitter-sweetness, reminded her of the ambivalence toward her upcoming marriage.

As the only Silvano heir, her father had taught her a bit about the winemaking business. She'd relished those private times, feeling part of her father's world. Now, she was afraid he would be forever angry with her. Her monthly bleeding still hadn't come. Embarrassment and fear kept her silent.

Last night she'd endured the latest in a string of pre-wedding celebrations. The Callistos had hosted a large dinner that had included the mayor, important business people, and other large vine-yard owners in the area. Her mother had schooled her on how she should sit, stand, and speak. Gianna said she already knew these things, but the woman had insisted, making Gianna feel inadequate. It had been one of the most boring evenings of her life. She couldn't imagine enduring such parties for the rest of her days.

She reached the clump of olive trees that formed the north perimeter of the vineyard and sat beneath the tree where a soft breeze whispered, reminding her of Nicola's words of love. Gianna fished the letter from her pocket.

*My darling Gianna,*

*I love you with all my heart and soul and always will. For whatever reason, your father did not see me as a suitable husband. I will be forever sorry for that. He forced my family to move. Before my father died, I made a promise to support my mother and sister. I have gone to Napoli, and I'm living*

*with my uncle. Don't worry, I have found work here.*

*I think of you often. I hope someday we'll be together  
once again. I look forward to that time.*

*Your beloved,*

*Nicola*

Her tears soaked the paper, smearing the ink. Gianna held the letter close to her heart. Nicola was in Napoli. At first she was angry with her father, then thinking it over, she realized she'd been the one to tear Nicola's family apart. She should have told Nicola she'd been promised to Santino. Maybe if he'd known, none of this would have happened. She rose. A wave of dizziness made her lean against the tree trunk. How would she ever forgive herself?

Her punishment was that she'd never see him again.

Nicola had his routes down. Depending on the day, he would visit as many as ten shops, collecting each owner's payment. When finished, he'd return the dark blue felt bag filled with money to Amato. Most nights his boss would greet him, take the bag, and invite him to enjoy a shot of grappa while launching into a litany of Maria's virtues. Nicola listened in stoic silence not knowing how to tell his boss he wasn't attracted to his daughter. Perhaps his uncle might help, but Nicola doubted it since Carmine spoke of Maria's abilities too. It seemed a conspiracy.

Nicola glanced at his father's pocket watch; noting it was just past six. He was late finishing his route today because Signora Luigi, a women's dress shop owner, and one of his contacts, had talked nonstop. Knowing she was lonely, Nicola had sat down for a cup of coffee. An hour had passed before she'd handed over her payment.

The door to Amato's shop was locked, but his boss let him in. "Nicola, where have you been?"

"I'm sorry, Signor, but Signora Luigi kept me longer than usual." He handed the money pouch over.

"That old woman is difficult, but you did good, son."

Amato ran his hands through the bag as if he knew how much money should be there. "Tonight, you'll eat with me. After dinner, I'll take you to meet my boss."

Nicola started to protest, but the look on Amato's face told him it was fruitless.

When the meal was over, Amato ushered Nicola along Napoli's dark streets, stopping at a warehouse along the waterfront. Nicola wrapped his jacket tight against the raw wind. The smell of sour seaweed, rotting fish, and burning wood made his eyes water. Waves lapped against the shadowy outline of ships anchored nearby. At the dark corridor's end, lights from several lanterns glowed.

"This way," Amato said.

Amato knocked three times on the massive door, paused, and then knocked twice. A latch released and the giant door opened. Several men greeted Amato.

“This is Nicola Romolo.” The men nodded and shook his hand. Amato moved toward a man who sat at the head of a large wooden table, two full shot glasses in front of him. His slicked-back hair was more gray than black, emphasizing his protruding nose. Sweat beads glistened on his forehead. An unbuttoned suit jacket hung loose over his large belly.

Amato bowed and kissed the ring on his right hand. Intricate carvings resembling an insignia caught Nicola’s eye.

“Don Bondello, may I present Nicola Romolo.”

The older man’s eyes bore through to Nicola’s very soul, making him stiffen.

Amato nudged Nicola and motioned for him to shake Bondello’s hand.

“He’s strong,” Bondello said.

Amato patted Nicola’s back. “He’s done well.” Amato handed over a moneybag.

Bondello slid it to the man on his right. Everyone moved in closer while he counted the bills. “It’s all here.”

“Nicola Romolo, we will see what you are made of tonight,” Don Bondello said. “You see these two glasses? One is filled with poison, the other with grappa. If you are an honest man and wish to commit to the Camorra, then pick a glass and drink from it.”

Nicola’s pulse quickened. Who were these people? Which glass should he choose? He looked to Amato for answers, but his boss stood stoically. The other bystanders simply gawked waiting for him to make his choice.

Finally, Nicola grabbed a glass and stared straight into Don Bondello’s eyes. The man’s expressionless face showed no clue. Nicola sniffed the liquid. It smelled like grappa. He took another long look into Bondello’s eyes, but the Don didn’t flinch. Nicola threw the shot back. It tasted like grappa and lightly burned his throat. He slammed down the empty glass, setting it in its original spot.

He waited.

No one spoke.

Suddenly, Don Bondello smiled. “You chose wisely, my son.”

He motioned for Nicola to kiss his ring.

Gianna woke to the morning’s cool breezes and cloudless sky. She lingered in bed. Today was her wedding day—the last time she’d sleep in her father’s home. Always envisioning this day as joyful, she was saddened that happiness eluded her.

Her wedding dress, neatly pressed, hung on the corner of the cherry

armoire. The accessories were laid out on a chair. Her things were ready, but she wasn't. She dreaded this day. It meant Nicola would never be hers.

Certain she was pregnant, she had all the symptoms other women discussed: no period, tender breasts, morning retching, no appetite.

Yesterday, her mother had taken her into her private bedroom and given her the 'talk.' She demurely told Gianna to lie still on her wedding night, and do nothing to encourage her husband. Men knew what to do. Finally her mother said it was important to submit to her husband every few weeks, explaining it would keep him happy.

Her mother's version of lovemaking sounded like a matter-of-fact duty, lacking love. Gianna knew from her lone experience, it wasn't that way. Guiltily, she'd almost blurted this out. Instead, she'd bitten her tongue and listened.

She wondered what her wedding night *would* be like. Would Santino guess she'd been with someone else? How would he know? If he found out, would he annul the marriage? Another wave of nausea tore through her just thinking about it. Deciding to leave it all in fate's hands, she pushed off the embroidered coverlet, got up, and threw-up in a washbasin.

Nicola woke to the dawn's light piercing through the curtains, loathing that today, after mass, he would go with his uncle to Amato's place for lunch—a weekly habit. Lately, Amato seemed friendlier, patting Nicola on the back, explaining he was now part of the inner circle and had a future with the Camorra. Nicola wanted to leave this dreadful place, but how? Others bought passage on ships sailing to America, but Nicola didn't have enough money since he sent most of his earnings to his mother and Eleonora. How could he earn more money? Certainly Amato wouldn't help, and he knew his uncle wouldn't approve of him leaving the country.

Memories of the lush vines and earthy mushrooms made him smile. He belonged on a vineyard working in the fields, not here in this stinking city.

He slipped out of bed and picked up the letter Signora Luciana had left for him. Eleonora's handwriting was on the envelope. He tore it open and scanned for Gianna's name.

*Gianna has returned from Paris. I was able to bring her your letter without anyone knowing. She smiled when I told her it was from you. We didn't have a chance to talk since she was afraid to be seen with me. She looked well and even more beautiful than ever. I think the Paris trip did her good. The bad news is that banns for her wedding were posted. She will marry Santino Callisto this Saturday. The wedding*

*plans are lavish. Everyone in town is talking about it. Of course, mother and I were not invited. I don't think we would have gone even if we were. This all seems sudden, and I'll let you know if I find out anything else.*

*I know this news is shocking. I'm sorry.*

*I think of you often. Mother and I miss you very much.*

*We send you all our love,*

*Eleonora*

Nicola reread the letter twice making sure he hadn't misunderstood. Gianna and Callisto! How could she? He remembered Gianna's father speaking of the Callisto family, knowing they owned the biggest and most profitable vineyard in the area. He guessed this was the reason for the marriage—to unite the vineyards. Signor Silvano could increase his wealth.

Nicola wanted to go home, but it was pointless. Even if he had the money for a train ticket, he'd be powerless to stop the wedding.

In the hall, he heard the sounds of a woman's moan coming from Father Grimaldo's room, again sending an anxious chill down his spine. He tiptoed closer and put his ear to the door. Someone was making love, he was certain. Where was his uncle?

Downstairs, he found the kitchen table set for breakfast. No one was around. He grabbed a sweet roll from a dish in the center of the table.

He had to talk with his uncle soon.

Gianna stood in the bathroom of her new home. Santino's parents had given the newlyweds a small cottage located near the main house as a wedding present. It was equipped with everything she needed and hoped for. The Callistos had spared no expense.

Santino was in bed, waiting. The wedding had been beautiful; her mother was pleased, having received compliments from the important families in Montepulciano. Her gold wedding band fit tight, and she toyed with it. Santino had told her to take her time, but she'd already changed, washed her face, and let her hair fall around her shoulders. She stared in the mirror. Would he know? How long could she stay in here? She took a deep breath and opened the door.

Silently, she climbed into bed.

"You were in there a long time. Are you all right?"

"Just a little nervous, I guess."

Santino moved closer, propped himself on his elbow, and caressed her face. Gianna shuddered. What should she do? She felt her back stiffen from fear.

"Relax," Santino said.

He kissed her, but his breath stank, and she wanted to push him away. Then he pulled her nightdress up, and she felt her nipples harden

against the cool air coming from an open window. She shivered and wished the lantern was turned off.

Shouldn't this happen in the dark?

Her new husband clumsily caressed her breasts, which hurt. She suffered silently. He pulled his night pants down. The sight of his hard organ nauseated her. She closed her eyes. Santino slid on top of her and entered her. She whimpered.

"Just lie still."

He pumped slowly. After a few minutes, she felt the same damp moistness she'd felt when Nicola had made love to her, and the pain ceased. He pumped more purposely, moaned, and stopped. The weight of his body pressed against her chest. She dared not move, but after he caught his breath, he rolled back to his side of the bed.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"The more we do it, the more you'll like it."

His matter-of-fact tone made her cringe. "I'm going to get up," she said.

"Suit yourself." He rolled over, settling into his pillow.

Gianna climbed out of bed and went in the bathroom. A wave of dizziness overwhelmed her. She vomited. Warily, she wiped her face—at least she'd gotten through her wedding night.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

The next morning, the cooing of a mourning dove outside the window pulled Gianna awake. Finding Santino gone, she touched his pillow. It was wet, soaked in fact, and she wondered if all men sweated like that at night.

“Santino?” The silence was broken only by the bird’s song. “Santino?” When he didn’t answer, she rolled back the blanket and got up.

The drawer to her husband’s nightstand was open, and she peeked in and pulled out a red velvet case. Inside sat half a medallion with the image of St. John the Baptist carved into it. It looked valuable and old. Was this some sort of family heirloom? Feeling like she’d violated a trust, she put it back and made her way to the main house.

She opened the kitchen door and smoothed back her hair.

A maid busied herself cutting fruit. “Good morning, Signora,” she said. “The family is having breakfast in the courtyard.”

She followed the sound of a fountain’s trickle while inhaling sweet honeysuckle and fresh rosemary. Just before opening the French doors leading out, she stopped, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Her cheeks reddened—it didn’t seem right to spend her wedding night so close to her in-laws. Though she discussed personal matters with her mother, these people were strangers. Why couldn’t she and Santino have gone away?

After pushing the door partially open, she was surprised to see her father and hear him say, “Then it’s settled.”

She stopped cold.

“Yes,” her father-in-law said. “The purchase of one thousand acres will take place this month.” Papers rustled. “It’s just outside a town called Napa in California. I’m told the soil and weather are perfect. Several wineries are already in business. This will be the start of our new world operation.”

“When will you send your son?”

“As soon as my lawyers finalize the deal. Probably next month.”

Gianna lost her nerve and her appetite. She’d heard rumblings about this before, but had hoped it wasn’t true. Would Santino go alone? She backed away unnoticed while the men discussed other details she didn’t understand.

She went down to the vineyard. Santino was clipping grapevines with

cutters that looked like a pair of giant rusty scissors.

He looked up. "Why aren't you eating breakfast?" He continued working, barely acknowledging her presence.

"I was going to," she said. "Santino, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I overheard a conversation between our fathers."

"Your father is here already?"

She arched her eyebrows. "You knew he was coming?"

"Of course I knew. I just didn't expect he'd be here this early."

She blinked and took in a deep breath. "They mentioned some-thing about land in California."

He put the cutters down and wiped his brow with his handkerchief. "That's right, a place called Napa, just north of San Francisco. I understand it's beautiful country, and the climate is like here."

"Santino, I wish you had told me you were going there. I'm your wife, and I should know these things."

"I don't have to explain anything to you. We're both going because that's where we'll live. This is business, Gianna, just accept it." He threw her a haughty look and walked away.

Transfixed, Gianna watched Santino make his way up the path to the house. She didn't understand. Her parents had always coddled and protected her. Why would they send her to some foreign country now? It didn't make sense. She had to talk to someone about it, but who? Clearly, Santino had made his wishes known. Perhaps her mother could help.

Nicola and his uncle walked to Amato's house for Sunday dinner in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius clearly visible across the bay. In 79 A.D., the citizens of Pompeii and Herculaneum were sent to their deaths after the volcano erupted. After all this time, local residents still feared the volcano and prayed to their patron saint, San Gennaro, to spare Napoli from the same fate. A warm breeze caressed them and the fresh sea air was invigorating. Pedestrian chatter competed with the sound of horse-drawn carriages and hand-pulled carts.

For the past week, Nicola had spent every evening alone reading about St. Catherine and had discovered she'd had visions of the Virgin Mary. As a young girl, Catherine had walked to Avignon, France, in order to convince the Pope, who'd gone there, to return to Rome. Nicola thought the secret of the medallion might be wrapped up in the saint's history, but so far he'd found no evidence.

Carmine seemed lost in thought. Nicola decided this was the perfect opportunity to ask about the strange noises coming from Father Grimaldo's room.

"Uncle," he said. "I need to ask you something, but I'm not finding the words."

His uncle stopped and faced him. "What is it? Are you in love with

Maria?”

Astonished, Nicola stared. How had Carmine jumped to this conclusion? He needed to choose his words carefully. On the one hand, he didn't want his uncle or Amato thinking there could be anything between him and Maria. On the other, he didn't want to insult them.

“Maria is a wonderful woman.”

“Nicola, remember love happens over time. I've seen it over and over. The most successful marriages are between two people who work together toward common goals. When children come, it gets difficult. Men worry about feeding their family. Women spend their time taking care of the house. You'll want a wife who knows her place and is adept at cooking, cleaning, and making clothing. Maria is such a woman. Don't you see that?”

“Maria is a lovely girl, but she's...”

“Not as beautiful as some. I know that. Trust me. You'll be much happier with a woman who isn't beautiful.”

When they arrived, Amato's wife greeted them and told them to go to the dining room where Maria was setting the table. Oblivious to company, Maria sang *Ave Maria*. Her eyes glowed, and the beauty of her voice rose, replacing the plainness of her face. Carmine and Nicola stood mesmerized.

When she finished Carmine applauded. “That was beautiful.”

Startled, the young woman looked up and dropped a plate on the stone floor. “Oh...” Her flaming cheeks gave her face a whole new glow. For a second, she looked attractive.

Amato came rushing out. “What happened?”

“It seems we startled your daughter.” Carmine helped Maria pick up the broken pieces.

“I'm sorry, Papa,” she said. “I wasn't paying attention.”

“You have the voice of an angel, Maria. You should sing in the church choir,” Carmine said.

Her mother brought a broom and a basket. “Unfortunately, Maria doesn't have time with all of her duties in the shop.” Then with a wave, she dismissed her daughter. “Maria, take a walk with Nicola.”

“Si, Mama.” Maria's eyes pleaded with Nicola.

Nicola followed her down an iron staircase to a small courtyard, brimming with pots of basil, rosemary, thyme, and red and white geraniums. A small bench sat in one corner, several large amphorae stood decoratively on either side of it.

“I'm sorry.” She lowered her head.

“Don't be sorry, accidents happen. Besides, my uncle's right. You do have a beautiful voice.”

“All my life I've wanted to sing, but the only chance I get is when I'm alone. My parents think it's silly and they say I should learn

housekeeping and how to run the shop instead.”

Nicola shuffled his feet. He didn't like being alone with Maria, even though Carmine and her father stood on the balcony watching them. She was pleasant and intelligent, but he didn't want her to think of him amorously.

“Perhaps we should help your mother with dinner,” he said.

“No. My mother will want to do it herself. She'll be afraid I'll make more mistakes.”

“Dropping a plate is hardly a mistake.”

“You have to understand my mother. She always wants things perfect, especially when we have company. Are your parents that way?”

“I suppose my mother is like that. I worked in the vineyard and know nothing of these things.”

“In Montepulciano? Do you miss it?”

Nicola nodded. “I miss my family and the work. I love the earth, particularly when it comes to growing grapes. I miss the smell of the vineyard, the grapes, and seeing the ordered rows of vines.”

“It sounds lovely.”

She understood! He could see it in her eyes. “Someday, I plan to have my own vineyard.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I thought you were happy working for my father. He talks about your future here all the time.”

“I'm very grateful for your father's help, Maria. But I don't want to stay here, and it has nothing to do with him. It's just...”

“It's just that you want to grow grapes,” she said.

“And make wine. The finest wine Italy has ever known.”

“It's a wonderful dream, Nicola. Perhaps someday, it will happen.”

“I know it will,” he said.

Suddenly, his uncle's words rang true. Maria's beauty was not in her face, but in her soul.

Gianna walked along the dusty dirt path through the rows of vines forming the boundary between the Callisto vineyards and her parents' property. As a child, she'd walked this path many times, and her family had used it when they visited the Callistos. Although she didn't understand business, it pleased her to think the vineyards provided work for those who lived around Montepulciano. Even though salaries were meager, people often expressed gratitude to her family.

Entering through a side door, she found her mother reading a magazine.

“Gianna, whatever are you doing here?”

Nothing in her mother's tone or expression was welcoming. “I need to talk, Mama.”

Her mother motioned to the chair opposite. “Were there problems

last night?"

"No. Last night was fine, just as you explained. I overheard something this morning and wanted to ask you about it."

"You mean you listened in on your father's business dealings with the Callistos?"

Gianna stiffened. Why did her mother make her feel everything was her fault?

"I didn't mean to listen. I was on my way to breakfast and didn't even know Papa was there. I heard them talking about a place called California."

Her mother nodded.

"Santino said we were moving there." She hoped her mother would say it wasn't true.

"There's much you don't understand, my daughter. This is about business, not about you. I told you before, you have responsibilities."

"I realize that." Gianna lowered her eyes.

"You're a married woman now. You must go wherever your husband takes you. Remember your marriage vows, you must obey him."

"California must be halfway around the world. I'll never see you or Papa again if I go there." Tears welled in her eyes. The weight of her bones felt like they might collapse around her.

"My God, girl! First, if you had paid attention to your studies, as you should have, you would know more about America and California. Second, didn't I just make myself clear? It doesn't matter where your husband goes. You will go with him, and carry yourself with the pride of a Silvano. You're behaving very badly." Her mother shook a finger at her. "I'm glad your father isn't here."

"He might have more mercy than you!" The force of her tone shocked Gianna. She wondered where her courage had come from.

Her mother's eyes sparked venom. "Don't speak to me like that! Your father feels as I do. Besides if you hadn't behaved like a whore, this would never have happened."

Gianna spilled tears onto the tablecloth. "Why, Mama? Why are you calling me that awful name?"

Her mother pursed her lips. "Your father told me everything. We've had to keep this quiet or we would have never been able to marry you off." Her mother shook her finger again. "You were seen making love to that peasant!"

Gianna cupped her hands to her mouth. They knew.

"Your father had to pay off his foreman to silence him. Between that and your wedding, you've cost us plenty."

Gianna's anger bubbled. In a second, it popped like a champagne cork. "I don't understand how a mother can say that. You've always been unkind to me. You wanted me to marry Santino so you could host the

biggest wedding Montepulciano's ever seen."

The stinging slap across her face almost knocked her out of her chair. "You ungrateful girl! All I've done is sacrifice for you. Since the day you were born, you've been a burden. Now look at you—married to one of the finest families in Montepulciano. You're very lucky, Gianna, very lucky indeed, given how you've behaved like a tramp."

"I'm not a tramp."

"Your actions speak otherwise."

"And you're a selfish wench who can never understand what really loving a man means!"

Gianna locked eyes with her mother, who was ready to strike again, but Gianna fled. Once back in the vineyard, she collapsed on the ground, sobbing uncontrollably, her hands covering her face. She looked up when she heard her father's sympathetic voice.

"Gianna, whatever are you doing here? What's the matter?"

"Oh, Papa!" She stood and threw her arms around him. "I just had a fight with Mama."

"Gianna, you're a grown woman now. Can't you make peace with your mother? I know she's difficult sometimes, but she has your best interest at heart." He patted her back, letting her cry for a few more minutes, then wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Listen to me," he said. "Santino told me that you asked about our business dealings this morning. You have to understand that going to California isn't the end of the world. It's a whole new beginning."

She choked back tears. "But Papa, I'll never see you again."

"Not true, daughter. Your mother and I can visit. And there will be times when you can come home. I wish I'd had the chance to do this when I was your age. This is exciting."

"But I don't want to go. I want to live here near you and Mama. I love this place."

"And you will learn to love California."

Her father's eyes spoke no compromise. "I really don't understand, Papa. How can you send me away?"

"There's much you don't understand. Gianna, I love you with all my heart, but you brought this on yourself."

She bowed her head, ashamed. "I know, Papa. I'm so sorry. It's just that I love Nicola."

"Forget Nicola. He can only bring you misery. Your happiness now lies with Santino. Besides, I need you to be brave."

"Why, Papa?" As a child he'd talked with her about the winery, but as she got older, he'd spent less time doing so, saying he wanted her to learn to run a house.

Silvano took her hand. "Let's walk for a little while."

She curled her fingers around his the same way she had as a little

girl.

“Gianna, our vineyard has been losing money for a long time. Remember when we had all those problems with phyloxera?”

She nodded.

“Well, we didn’t produce wine for almost three years. Not making wine meant no money.”

Her mouth hung open “You mean we don’t have any money?”

“We’re not impoverished, but there are still many unpaid debts. I promised your grandfather I would make this vineyard profitable. Your marriage to the Callistos provided an opportunity for me to do business with them. They are financing this venture in Napa Valley.”

He stopped, faced her, and put his hands on her shoulders. “Gianna, I never had a son, so it is your responsibility to help our vineyard survive. Can you understand that?”

She didn’t, but her heart melted when she saw the desperation in her father’s face. The vineyard meant everything to him and yes, as his only heir, it was her responsibility to help. She squared her shoulders.

“I understand. I promise, Papa, I will make you proud of me.” She brushed her lips against both his cheeks.

“Good. Now you go back to your husband. The Callistos will take care of all the details.”

“Am I leaving soon?”

“Probably not for another month. Be brave, Gianna. I know you can do this.”

Gianna wanted to tell him she was pregnant, but couldn’t.

She’d wait for the right moment to announce she was with child.