

PROLOGUE

Wine, the color of blood. Not crimson fresh pouring from an open wound, but *Bruno*. The color of dried blood.

Yet, it gushes with life as a gloved hand opens the spigot of the first oak barrel, then the next, moving quickly. A dozen now. Barrels as tall as one man stacked upon the shoulders of another.

Wine slaps the tile floor. It swirls toward the drain. Then the shriek of ripping plastic, knife splitting wide the cover encasing rows of bottled wine. Hands grabbing one, then another, by the neck, smashing them violently against the metal rack.

The early morning silence of the cellar has been interrupted, though it disturbs no one. The cry of destruction will not permeate the thick stone walls of the cellar, even as glass shards fly and rain down upon the Tuscan tile, and the open taps of the wooden barrels continue to pour forth precious liquid. *Borelli Brunello*.

CHAPTER ONE

For over sixty years, Paolo Paluzzi has worked at the Borelli state in the municipality of Montalcino, in the province of Siena, just south of the Renaissance City of Florence. Originally hired by Vittorio Borelli, Paolo has served loyally as the business passed to Vittorio's children, Giovanni Borelli and Estella Borelli Antonelli.

In the early days, the estate was small but has grown to over 1,000 hectares, less than a third planted with vines. The villa, home now to three generations of Borellis, sits on more than a hectare, and within resides much history. Yet, the Borelli name itself will live on only through the legacy of the label. A son who has become a priest, and a daughter who has become an Antonelli, will produce no heirs to carry on the family name.

Paolo labors not in the vineyards, but in the intimate gardens of the estate, tending the rows of tomatoes, squash, and fresh herbs, trimming the hedges in the labyrinth of the garden open to the public, pruning the flowering bougainvillea and wisteria vines that climb along the villa walls, the arbors and entry to the visitors' center.

Each morning Paolo sits in the garden on one of the elaborately carved benches, perched next to a putto or figure of a Roman woman draped in stone, the fountain's open-mouthed fish gently spewing water, creating a soothing rhythm for Paolo to begin his day. Sitting for a smoke before tending to his gardens, he watches the rising sun, streaking the sky with rays of Tuscan gold and pink, glazing the hills with a patina of extraordinary light. Gazing out toward the vineyards and orchards, the dips in

the land where natural forests of pine and oak spring forth, he never wonders what lies beyond, content with his life just as it is.

It is generally a peaceful, quiet time, but this morning he notices the gathering clouds, an unfamiliar movement in the air, and he senses something amiss. He rises and slowly makes his way along the garden path, passing through the perfect arch of the trimmed greenery separating the villa grounds from the cellar. He casts his gaze about, though he sees nothing out of place.

Arriving at the cellar, he immediately notices that the lock has been broken. Cautiously, he pushes the heavy wooden door open and steps over the threshold, pausing, listening a moment before entering. He hears not human voices, but a sound that sends a shock of fear through him, as does the smell. Not the familiar aroma of wine contained in oak, but wine let loose. Taking a deep breath, he snaps on the lights and sees the spigots on the large oak barrels have been opened, wine rushing forth. Quickly, intent on stopping the flow, he steps toward the first barrel, losing his balance, foot slipping along the tile floor, made slick by the flow of wine. Steadying himself, he takes another step, slipping again, hitting his head on the metal edge of the large wooden barrel. Staggering, he attempts to right himself, hand reaching out to grab something that isn't there. Dizzy, he groans, feeling the damp warm blood oozing from his head. As he reaches up, the weight of his body, the fogginess of his mind, pulls him down. He is on the floor, trying desperately to hold on, but he is slipping, fading, vanishing.

Blood, mingling now, red with red, the fermented Sangiovese grapes mixing with true blood.

Paolo's body, face down, gurgling, attempting to draw breath, breathing in the wine.

Broken glass, broken dreams. Clogging the drain, as the wine, the lifeblood of the Borelli family, rises higher and higher.

CHAPTER TWO

Dana Pierson stopped on the footpath where she and Father Giovanni Borelli walked between the vines.

"It's beautiful," she said, gazing down toward neighboring vineyards winding rhythmically along the hillside, rising above pockets of olive groves and forested land. It was October, just after the harvest and the autumn colors had yet to alter the lush green landscape. Clouds that had earlier threatened their morning excursion had parted, revealing cypress trees casting thin shadows across narrow roads below. Stone farmhouses and red-tiled villas dotted the landscape. Borelli had also slowed his pace to take in the vista, though it was one he knew well.

"I am still amazed," he replied as they continued their stroll, "by the beauty of the land. I find myself at peace when I am here." He'd grown up on the estate, had studied and lived in Rome for many years, but was now retired and living in the family villa with his sister, Estella, her son, Leonardo Antonelli, and Leo's daughter, Mia.

After many invitations to visit the Borelli Vineyards, Dana had accepted. She would spend a week, then planned on meeting two old college girlfriends in Rome.

"Would you like to visit one of the cellars?" Borelli asked, but before Dana could answer he exclaimed, "No, no, we must take advantage of the day!" He gazed upward. "Let's drive into Montalcino."

They had arrived at the base of the hill where they'd parked Borelli's truck. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his keys and presented them to Dana. Reluctantly, she took them, realizing they

would have to return to the villa for a driver unless she was willing to take the wheel. Borelli no longer possessed a valid driver's license, though he had explained it was perfectly legal for him to drive on the family's private land, the vastness of which Dana had experienced that morning as she began her official Borelli Vineyards tour.

"We could visit the *fortezza*," he suggested, "the church, do some shopping if you wish. We will visit the cellars later this afternoon."

"Sounds like a good plan." Dana slid into the driver's seat and started the motor of the truck which she might have described as either vintage or old beat-up clunker. "Do you think Mia would like to go with us?"

"She has always enjoyed these excursions, but lately . . . I imagine she has something planned with her friends for the weekend."

"She no longer enjoys the company of adults?" Dana smiled, remembering a time long ago when she'd rather hang out with friends, certainly not parents or grandparents. She would do anything now to spend time with her father. Dana thought of Mia's father, Leo, and the obvious rift between them. Dana had overheard a conversation—in Italian, which she didn't understand—though it was obvious the two were arguing. Then, the lack of warmth between them at dinner was palpable. Yet, Dana sensed a special bond between Mia and her great uncle as they'd exchanged glances, a whisper, a quick grin, over the course of the evening.

Dana and Father Borelli had a bond, too, one that might be difficult to define or explain. She certainly couldn't claim he reminded her of her father, though he was close to the age her dad would have been. Her father was a quiet, thoughtful man, a professional athlete at one time, a baseball player. He'd had a second career as a sports writer and had been instrumental in getting Dana into the profession of journalism.

Borelli, on the other hand, was loquacious, unafraid to express his opinions, and if he had not told Dana he'd been a skillful soccer player in his youth, she would not have thought of him as an athlete.

Years ago, Borelli had been sent to Boston as a representative of the Vatican. Their paths had intersected, but he and Dana had not met until she visited her cousin, a nun with the community of the Discalced Carmelites in Prague. Father Borelli was visiting his childhood friend, Father Giuseppe Ruffino. Dana and Borelli had been forced to work together when an ancient fifteenth-century icon, an image of the Christ Child, had disappeared from a small church in the Mala Strana. With her background in investigative journalism and Borelli's not-completely-explained past role as a canon lawyer and researcher for the Vatican, their joining forces was inevitable.

They had not seen each other for over four years, but they had written during this time. Old-fashioned letters, delivered through the U.S. and not-always-reliable Italian postal systems, had been their sole means of communication.

While the tenor of the letters could in no way be described as intimate—they wrote of current events, history, and occasionally of family—their friendship had continued to grow. Dana wasn't even sure why, though he was one of the few she had spoken with openly about her greatest loss. One might expect to lose a parent, but never a child. And this was the loss that continued to define Dana's life—the disappearance of her son, Joel. At times, she perceived a deep loss within Giovanni Borelli, too. Though it remained unspoken, she sensed a sadness, a searching for something missing. And maybe this was the very aspect of their lives that had drawn them together.