

The
INHERITANCE

by
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CHAPTER ONE

“O glorious Saint Gerard Majella, preserve Nella from the excessive pains of childbirth,” Padre Valentine prayed.

A feeble ray of morning light passed through the small window of the one room cottage. It was not the brilliant beam of gold that the priest had wanted but it was still a sign that there was hope for the young woman who lay quietly on the blood soaked straw mattress in front of him. Hers was not the first desperate situation he'd witnessed nor, he lamented, would it be the last. After four years, Padre Valentine still couldn't fully accept that his life would end in Cetraro; a desolate fishing village on Calabria's rocky Tyrrhenian coast.

The priest touched Nella's forehead. *“Release her dear God and shield the child she now carries.”* He made the sign of the cross and she started to scream again. He pulled his hand back. Nella's body twisted and turned and shaped itself into unnatural contortions. There was no reason for the priest to finish his prayer; no one would be able to hear his words. Padre Valentine wasn't even certain if God was listening anymore.

“She should have given up the baby two days ago,” Mafalda said. She leaned her thick upper torso over Nella's flat chest. The *Gobbo* talisman attached to a piece of twine, which the old midwife always wore around her neck, began to swing side to side like a pendulum.

The rhythmical movement of the little gold statue of the hunchback mesmerized the priest and for an instant, he considered praying to the good luck charm.

“Padre, this can't go on for much longer.”

Mafalda's voice broke the spell. He moved closer to Nella as Mafalda pressed her large hands down on Nella's narrow shoulders.

It was 1897 and Padre Valentine had worked with Mafalda since he came to Cetraro as the new priest at St. Ursula's Church. Padre Valentine knew that Mafalda would do everything she could to save Nella and her unborn child.

“Make her still.”

The other midwife, Velia, yanked Nella's ankles, and pulled her spindly legs straight. She flattened the soles of Nella's bare feet against her heavy bosom. Padre Valentine did not know this midwife, and feared she might break Nella's bones.

“Padre, Nella knows her baby's not safe outside her womb.” Mafalda glanced at Velia. “We'll have to take it.”

Nella stopped kicking. Her round belly rose from her emaciated frame and a picture Padre Valentine had seen of Mount Vesuvius before it erupted and buried Pompei flashed through his mind. It was from a textbook that he had studied a decade ago when he had been a student in a theological seminary in Rome. The priest was ashamed that he had let such an image distract him. Nella needed his full attention now; that was why God had put him here. Padre Valentine tried to control his thoughts but sometimes he failed. He had never planned to be a priest in a poor Calabrian fishing village and sometimes, he still couldn't believe everything that had happened to him.

“I need clean rags,” Velia shouted to Anna.

Anna spun around, she had been praying to the twig crucifix on the mantle of the open stone fireplace next to the olive jar filled with her summer roses. The front of her silk dress was stained with her servant's blood. Flowers that had been pink had turned red, as had the band of ribbons that circled her tiny waist. Several hours ago, Padre Valentine had urged her to return to the villa, he promised he'd let her know what happened to her servant. But she refused to do so. Attending the birth of a servant child violated the code of decorum that her husband, Santo Marino, had set for

his wife. Even though Santo was still away, the priest was worried that somehow he would find out. Padre Valentine still did not understand why, after ten years of marriage, Anna had not yet learned what he had long ago accepted, that Santo Marino was not a man to be challenged.

“Here.” Anna snatched a rag from the pile on the floor and threw it to Velia. She took her place beside Mafalda.

“She’ll live.” Velia said. “I’ve never lost a sixteen year old mother.”

This hadn’t been true for Padre Valentine and Mafalda.

Velia shoved the rag into Nella.

“We’ll have to take it now,” Mafalda said.

Anna knew that her presence here would raise her husband’s ire; nevertheless, when Padre Valentine had brought her to Nella’s cottage yesterday, she could not abandon her.

“Take my place.”

Mafalda shifted towards Velia.

“Hold her head.”

It was difficult for Anna to believe that this was the same beautiful girl who had cared for her since her family moved to San Michelle four years ago. She placed a hand on each side of Nella’s swollen face. Anna was relieved that Nella’s husband, Edoardo, did not have to witness his wife’s suffering. Nella had tried to give Edoardo a child before they had come to San Michelle, but she was a bleeder and her body had given up the infant before it was fully formed. Edoardo worked as a gardener for Anna’s family; he was thirty-five and Anna knew that there was not much time left for him to be a father.

All of a sudden, blood spurted from Nella’s body, and sprayed the front of Velia’s dress. Padre Valentine needed to concentrate on something but the stone walls were bare.

The fetid air stirred the bile in his liver and he felt a bitter taste rise up in his throat. He rushed to the bucket of water by the door, grabbed the ladle off the floor and plunged it into the liquid; it was a miasma of dark colors and dank odors. The priest wiped his

mouth with the sleeve of his cassock; the dark material was sodden with a mixture of his sweat and Nella’s blood, he was repulsed by his own smell. Padre Valentine needed to pray, but he couldn’t think of anymore prayers to say and it seemed useless to repeat the other ones.

“There are no more rags.” Mafalda stood up. Velia and Anna held their places.

Nella was still bleeding.

Mafalda raised her fleshy arms to the ceiling. “Oh, lavender,” she cried. “Let your powers cast out the evil within our Nella.” She reached into the pocket of her skirt, and scooped up a handful of dried purple petals. “Oh, lavender, bring her peace and give us her child.” She sprinkled them over Nella’s body.

Padre Valentine grasped the silver crucifix suspended on a leather cord that hung around his neck. The individual sculptures of the bull, winged lion, bird and virgin riveted on each point pressed into his palm. The crucifix had been a gift from his friend, Fiore, who was now a doctor in Naples and the priest had worn it in St. Peter’s Square on the day of his ordination when Pope Leo X111 had blessed him. Padre Valentine released the crucifix. The imprints of the sculptures had marked his skin. Mafalda had stopped speaking. Why had his teachers not taught him how to deal with these superstitious people? They prayed with him in his church but whenever something frightened them, they resorted to the old ways. Padre Valentine hoped that he could reach their children, like this baby, if it lived.

The petals had absorbed Nella’s blood and were no longer discernible. Mafalda closed her eyes and touched the *Gobbo*. The flow finally abated.

Anna pulled a white handkerchief edged with lace from the sleeve of her dress and patted Nella’s forehead. Nella grew quiet.

“A flood,” Mafalda shouted an instant later. Nella’s body shaped itself once again into unnatural contortions.

“A river of blood,” Velia screamed.

Mafalda grabbed a blanket and Velia forced her hands into

Nella; Anna recoiled and her handkerchief dropped to the floor. Padre Valentine wanted to avert his eyes but he couldn't.

"Bambina."

Velia pulled the baby out of Nella. "A girl."

The baby hadn't cried. Anna shifted forward. Velia placed it in the blanket Mafalda held. It did not move and Padre Valentine feared that it was dead and he had lost both a mother and her child. Surely God would not do this to him. He held his breath. Nella shuddered then lay still. Mafalda wrapped the blanket tightly around the baby and stepped away.

Anna kissed Nella on her cheek, and walked over to Mafalda. Anna's first birth had been difficult and it had taken her son a few minutes to cry but Caesare was now stronger and bigger than any other nine-year-old boy Santo had ever seen. Benito had been born less than a year later and Anna had worried about his small size but he was fast and smart. Nella's baby whimpered. If Anna hadn't been standing close to Mafalda, she wouldn't have heard it.

Padre Valentine approached Mafalda and Velia followed him. He stood next to Anna. Her youngest son, Lorenzo, born three years ago in Cetraro, was the first child that he had anointed with this holy water; Nella's would be the last. The vial would be empty; Lorenzo and this newly born infant would forever share a blessed bond. Padre Valentine trudged to the door, and slid the board up to unlock it. He used both hands to pull it open, and stepped outside.

The warmth of the noonday sun dispelled the chill within the priest and for an instant he forgot that Nella had just died. An early summer breeze ruffled the heavy folds of his cassock and softly shaped clouds sauntered across the blue sky. Edoardo was tilling his vegetable garden and the stalks were just beginning to peak through the soil with the promise of new life. The day was too beautiful for someone who worked in harmony with the earth to hold such horror. Padre Valentine had spoken the words he needed to say to Edoardo to other men before but this didn't make it any easier for him now; he hoped that God would help him.

Edoardo threw his hoe on the ground. "Padre. Is it over?" His

legs covered the short distance between them in a few steps. He wore two different work boots; there were no laces in the eyelets and the leather was splattered with mud. "Can I see Nella now?"

"Come with me." He followed the priest into the cottage. Padre Valentine joined Mafalda and Velia in front of the fireplace; Edoardo staggered over to his wife.

"Amare." He brushed matted strands of dull, dark hair off her wasted face with his rough and soiled hands. When he kissed her closed eyelids one at a time, his chapped and cracked lips barely touched their sunken surface.

"It's a girl," the priest said.

"Bambina?" Edoardo asked.

Anna stepped out from behind the two midwives. She held the infant; it was wrapped in a clean brown blanket. She went over to Edoardo and he touched the downy black hair that covered his daughter's crusted head. Her face was speckled with Nella's blood and when her hand moved, Anna noticed a patch of tiny red dots on her left wrist. She had never seen such a strange birthmark. Padre Valentine walked over to them and Mafalda and Velia followed. Anna placed the baby in her father's arms.

"Bellissima," he said. "I'll name her Caterina."

Padre Valentine blessed them both.



It was late afternoon and Padre Valentine had already gone but Anna had wanted to make certain that there was someone to care for Caterina before she left. She was pleased when Mafalda told her that, Elda, a servant on the enclave who had been Nella's friend, would nurse the child. Oresto took her hand and she stepped up into the rear seat of her carriage then sat down.

"Would you like your shawl, *Signora* Marino?"

"Si." He placed it around her shoulders and Anna welcomed the familiar warmth. Her mother had died when she was a young girl but her memories kept her company; Caterina would have

none of her own. Edoardo would love his child but Anna knew that a father's love could never replace that of a mother's. Why did Caterina's life have to begin on such a note of sadness?

They passed brick and stone cottages and pens holding goats and sheep as they made the two-mile journey from the enclave back to the villa. Women and children were clustered around the well filling their buckets with water for their evening chores. They crossed onto the manicured grounds, gardens and flowerbeds of the 124-acre San Michelle Estate that Anna had come to love as much as her childhood home in Tuscany.

Five years ago when Anna was twenty-one, she had inherited a considerable amount of money when her father, a professor at the University of Pisa, had died; Santo had used a portion of it to purchase San Michelle.

Every morning Nella had helped her dress and every evening Nella had helped her prepare for bed. Anna's skin was delicate but Nella knew how to pour her bath so that the water was neither too hot nor too cold. She only had to tell her things once and Nella always remembered. Anna would miss her very, very much. The padding cradled her head and she closed her eyes.

"*Signora* Marino." Oresto's voice seemed to come from a distance. "We are here."

The pink colored limestone walls of the villa welcomed Anna home. Oresto helped her from the carriage, onto the crushed stones of the circular driveway. "*Grazie*. How is Fragola and your new *bambino*?"

"*Bene, Signora*." He grinned, making no attempt to hide his broken teeth.

"*Grazie* to you too, Grigio." She patted the old workhorse's grey muzzle. Oresto passed by her on the pathway, ran up the greenish-grey granite steps and opened one of the double symmetrical oak doors framed at the top with a Roman arch. Anna entered the villa.

"*Mamma*," Lorenzo yelled.

He raced down the staircase and it was as if Anna was

looking at a portrait of herself at three years of age; Lorenzo was unequivocally her son. Tears came to her for the first time since Nella had died.

"Where were you? I looked everywhere."

She stood beside the demi-lune table.

"You're bleeding," he screamed. "Who hurt you, *Mamma*?"

"No one hurt me, Lorenzo." She pulled him towards her. "I'm fine."

"What's wrong, *Mamma*? Why are you crying?"

"Nella died. Her baby girl has no *mamma*."

"Who's going to take care of the baby?"

"We will Lorenzo. We will take care of Caterina."

"Take my son to his room."

Santo's voice startled Anna.

"Now, Rinaldo."

"No, I want to stay with *Mamma*."

"It's all right, Lorenzo. Go. I'll see you in a little while." Anna kissed his cheek. "I'll come and read you a story."

Lorenzo took Rinaldo's hand and they walked away.

"Did you just get back?" Anna asked. She brushed her hair off her forehead, and repined a loose tendril. "I wasn't expecting you for a few days." She adjusted her shawl to hide as much of the blood stained fabric of her dress as possible. "It's good to see you." She shaped a smile on her lips, and hoped that it made her face look welcoming.

Santo had left Cetraro a week ago to visit Arduino Buccella, a business associate who lived in Cosenza; a town located about 35 miles away. Over the past few years, Buccella had helped her husband expand his fishing operations along the Tyrrhenian Coast and Santo now owned everything from Cetraro to Cirella on the Calabria-Basilicata border.

"We finished our business and there was no need to stay."

"Were there problems?"

"Of course not. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Our sons will be pleased to see you." The severe features of his

face softened for an instant just as she knew they would.

“I had lunch with Caesare and Benito. Bruno cooked the tuna they caught this morning.”

It was only natural for her oldest sons to share their father’s love of the sea for they were born in Diamante, a nearby village where Santo and his father had been fishermen and where Anna and Santo met. She and Mariangela, sixteen-year-old friends who attended the same convent school in Pisa, had been spending the summer with Anna’s grandmother.

When Anna first saw Santo, he was walking along the beach. His sun-bleached shirt had no buttons and he wore canvas-colored trousers cut just below the knees; a corded rope was tied around his trim waist and he was barefoot. His earth brown hair was shoulder length; the only comb it had ever known was the wind. Santo called her “a child of the sun” because she was so fair; her eyes, he said, “were the color of the sea.” His smile was dazzling; Santo was different than the other twenty-one year old men that Anna’s father brought to their villa. Was it any wonder that she fell in love with him or that everything happened so quickly that summer?

Her father was infuriated when Anna’s grandmother told him that she was going to have Santo’s child. She arranged to have a priest marry them but he refused to attend the ceremony. They moved into a house that her grandmother owned and Santo continued to work as a fisherman. When Caesare was born, her father relented and he gave Santo his dowry. Within three years, Anna had given birth to Benito, her grandmother had died and Santo had used his dowry to buy the fishing operations in Diamante and Cetraro. Even though Anna’s father was pleased that she was happy in her new life, they rarely saw each other for during this time period he remarried.

“Did Caesare and Benito go back out on the fishing boats?”

They had gone out on Santo’s fishing boats in Diamante before they could even walk. Caesare and Benito would crawl around on the slippery decks and Anna was terrified that they’d fall into the ocean; they never did.

“*Non*. They’ve gone riding on the trails.”

Her absence from the villa the past day had probably gone unnoticed. When Santo was away, Caesare and Benito weren’t required to eat dinner with her, and often didn’t. The only rule he gave them was that they had to stay together. This was unnecessary for right from the start; they had been inseparable, even insisting on sleeping in the same bed when they were young.

“Then, they’re going for a swim.”

Their villa was set on a cliff that overlooked a rocky beach on the Tyrrhenian Sea. Santo had taught Caesare and Benito to swim when they lived in Diamante but Anna still worried that the waves would pull them out.

“Lorenzo’s been with his teacher but he’s been asking for you.”

Anna had told Lorenzo that Padre Valentine needed her to help him in the church but she had been gone longer than she’d anticipated.

Santo ran a finger along the line of his dark mustache and she noticed that he was wearing a signet ring. The gold initial “N” rose from a square, black stone on the finger that was intended for a wedding ring. Her husband lavished Anna with expensive gifts of jewelry but never wore any himself. “Where did you get that ring?” Her interest was not feigned.

“From Buccella.”

“Why?”

“He wants me to run his fishing operations in Paola and Tropea. The ring was a token of his appreciation for me. I’m quite an asset to him, you know.”

His head moved up a fraction and Anna knew that the ring signified a new and important connection between her husband and this man. How could she find out what it was, and what the “N” stood for? “Did you invite him to come to San Michelle for a visit?”

“No. Buccella’s a very busy man.”

The heels of his leather boots struck the terra cotta as he stepped towards her and Anna feared that he would shatter the tile. Santo was dressed as usual, in a crisp white shirt and creased

black trousers. He shaved twice a day and had his dark, wavy hair trimmed regularly, his nails were clean and cut short. At thirty-one, Santo was still handsome but the fleshiness underneath his chin and around his waist were more pronounced than when Anna had married him. He crossed his arms on his chest.

When had he returned to San Michelle?

“Did you think that I wouldn’t find out?”

“Nella died giving birth.” She summoned tears to her eyes.

“I’ve always permitted you to visit the servants at *Natale* and to give them whatever gifts you want. It’s proper to be generous at *Natale*. But not this.”

“Her baby, Caterina, doesn’t have a mother.”

“No more, Anna.”

The tears would not work this time; it was best not to say anything whenever this happened.

“You’ve gone to their graveyard when their babies died and I’ve tolerated this because I knew you wanted more children. Then last year I found out that you were giving Lorenzo’s old clothes to families in the village. Do you know how embarrassing it was for me to see the children of my fisherman wearing my son’s shoes?” Santo leaned over her. “I will no longer tolerate your foolishness.”

His sweet cologne made her nauseous.

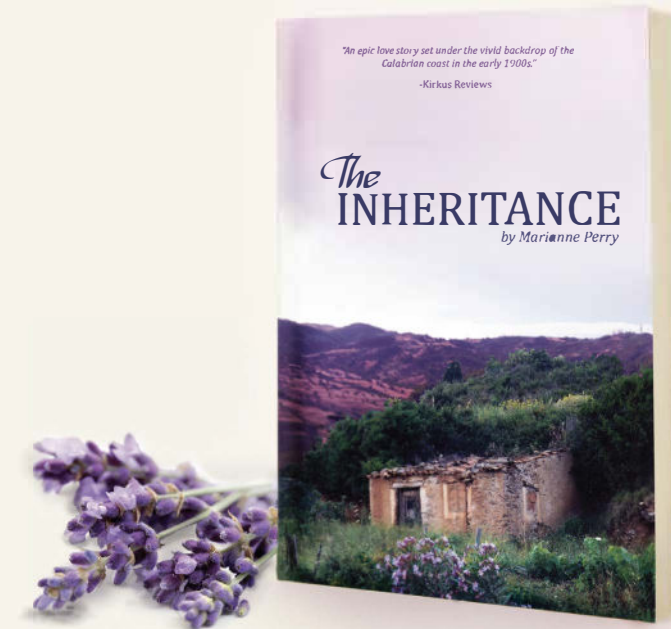
“You will not ruin Santo Marino’s name.”

She held her breath.

“You smell. Fragola will pour your bath. And get rid of that dress.” He stepped back. “Bruno will have dinner ready at the usual time and we will all eat together tonight.” He left the villa.

Anna walked towards the staircase; there was plenty of time for her to bathe and read Lorenzo a story before dinner. When would her husband leave San Michelle again? Soon, she hoped. Anna planted her foot on the first riser; she could hardly wait to take Lorenzo to see Caterina.

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