

Chapter One

It was late afternoon when I rattled my way towards the *balmetti*, the village of party houses near Monteleone. The unique structures huddled together as a medieval ghost town, their uneven stone rows cutting into the mountain. The sensation was like entering the 1880s, never mind that I was arriving by car. I parked my borrowed Fiat in the adjoining piazza. It felt wrong to visit the *balmetti* in the dead of summer when no one else was there. Younger villagers were at work or school while the retirees were napping, but I wouldn't be staying myself. I was dropping off supplies.

Despite the quiet, my head was full of voices: "Sofi, the villagers love a party!" "Sofi, you need to pay back all the favors you owe!" The only words I embraced had come from Ivano, my cousin-in-law. "I'll pour them wine until they drop!" he promised. This was precisely what I wanted to hear. I needed a way to unload excess wine. While my parents and I had been living peacefully in Boston, my cousins had loaded the space with each year's surplus. The result was an obstacle course so packed I didn't have room to de-clutter it. The most I could do was serpentine my way from side to side.

I loaded myself with grocery bags and headed up the steep incline. Never mind the private courtyards for summer picnics or the upper rooms for winter festivities. The *balmetti* were important for their cellars. Thanks to the natural fissures in the rocks, the dark, damp spaces did a perfect job of protecting the homemade reds and whites. I couldn't appreciate the phenomenon. Although I never admitted it to the locals, I couldn't stand the taste of wine.

I continued past landmarks. During the last weeks Ivano had brought me to parties at a dozen *balmetti*. Over pasta and pastries, I'd ignored the hearty reds and concentrated on the local dialect. Piemontese was a mix of Italian, which I'd learned at home, and French, which I'd learned at school. When I caught whole sentences, I cheered.

As I climbed to the second row of structures, I imagined my four great-grandparents along this same path. They had sworn by the precious vines that provided a meager livelihood. Then they'd chanced a one-way ocean voyage. I'd grown up hearing glowing stories of the Old Country, but even after a summer in Monteleone, I wasn't sure I was Italian. Among other faults, I never cooked. Then again, even in English, I always talked with my hands.

My only loyal companion, a gray cat, meowed as I approached. As usual, he was perched on the wall that divided my property from my neighbor's. He'd meowed at me all summer but rarely left his favorite spot. I understood why. He was half on one property, half on another just as I thought half in English and half in Italian, felt half at home in Italy and half homesick for the East Coast. I loved being in Piemonte, but I didn't belong. Not really. I was too impatient. I was too straightforward. And I didn't like wine.

I flipped on the electricity box I shared with the neighbors and unhooked the high gate leading into my yard. At least the area was safe. Given the constant comings and goings of all the workers, I'd stopped locking the gate weeks before, yet the tools never disappeared. Forgotten cell phones lay right where the owners had left them. Bottles were returned, empty but washed.

Stepping inside the yard, I allowed myself a moment of satisfaction. The outside wall no longer crumbled. The electricity no longer crackled. The stairs were patched, and the cobwebs and snakes had been swept away. The weeds had been meticulously pulled, by me, one stubborn plant at a time.

For tonight's event, borrowed picnic tables crowded the yard. Plastic silverware and paper napkins filled a basket. A pot waited near the portable burner. Aunt Maria promised to make the best Bolognese sauce ever, and I could already taste the roasted garlic she would throw inside. The woman was a godsend. The guests would need as much food as possible to help soak up all that wine.

As I descended the three steps to the cellar, I extracted the key from my purse. The metal monster measured half a foot long and weighed as much as a bread knife. It was also weighted

with history. My great-grandfather had made six copies of the master key: one for each of his children. Had he awarded them keys on their eighteenth birthdays? When they married? As soon as they reached puberty?

They would have been proud that their father had built such a fine party house for the family jewels—the fruit of their vines. The older teens would have filled long summer nights with friends and drinking and clandestine trysts. How many of my relatives had been conceived on the spot? My dad's father, Nonno Luigi, was the jolliest of all. He'd retired at sixty-two and moved to Florida to spend the rest of his life at leisure. Certainly, he was a candidate.

I was about to insert the key into the lock when I realized the door was ajar. This was not unreasonable. Ivano and Cousin Renato had promised to stop by during the afternoon. Either might have been careless with the door. Using my shoulder, I pushed open the wooden slab. I turned on the light switch, but after I turned around, I dropped the sacks of breadsticks, which crunched as they hit. Then I screamed.

Ivano lay on his back on the dirt floor. His gardening shorts were fresh, but his blue T-shirt was splotted with dots of burgundy. His eyes were open, so I swooped down and rocked his shoulders as if to wake him from a hallucinogenic nap, but I was way too late.

Clutching my stomach, I ran out into the sunshine and doubled over. I was dreaming. I was mistaken. Something was wrong with my eyes or my senses or my brain. I had not just seen a dead man, and the dead man was not my cousin-in-law. It wasn't possible.

I collapsed onto the nearest picnic bench, but the hot planks shot me back to my feet. I sank into the grass, hoping Ivano had died so fast he never felt it. Heart attack? Stroke? Aneurysm? Ivano hadn't hit fifty, but he was no longer thin and only exercised when he danced. At every party, he lapped up plenty of wine.

I fumbled for my cell phone, but it was too late to call a doctor. My cousin Grazia, Ivano's wife, was in nearby Aosta visiting a sick friend. Her mother, Aunt Maria, would be between grocery stores, but she might pick up.

Except that my cell phone was down to three percent.

On my way downhill to the piazza, I stumbled past the other party houses nestled into the rock fissures. I could barely see through the tears. Ivano had always been kind to me. He'd made me feel at home. He'd treated me like his own relative. How could he be gone?

I killed my aunt's Fiat's twice before starting it. I bounced over the cobblestones. Where to go? The nearest hospital was in Ivrea, nearly ten kilometres to the south. As I reached the paved road, I remembered the municipal police station between Monteleone and Cafreddo. The towns along the river were so small that one office served several of them. I strained the brakes for a quick U-turn and doubled back. A police officer would be able to help me. Surely.

