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The VILLA



The
VILLA

Nora Roberts



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THE VILLA

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*To family, who form the roots.
To friends, who make the blossoms.*

PROLOGUE

On the night he was murdered, Bernardo Baptista dined simply on bread and cheese and a bottle of Merlot. The wine was a bit young, and Bernardo was not. Neither would continue to age.

Like his bread and cheese, Bernardo was a simple man. He had lived in the same little house in the gentle hills north of Venice since his marriage fifty-one years before. His five children had been raised there. His wife had died there.

Now at seventy-three, Bernardo lived alone, with most of his family a stone's throw away, at the edges of the grand Giambelli vineyard where he had worked since his youth.

He had known *La Signora* since her girlhood, and had been taught to remove his cap whenever she passed by. Even now if Tereza Giambelli traveled from California back to the *castello* and vineyard, she would stop if she saw him. And they would talk of the old days when her grandfather and his had worked the vines.

Signore Baptista, she called him. Respectfully. He had great appreciation for *La Signora*, and had been loyal to her and hers the whole of his life.

For more than sixty years he had taken part in the making of Giambelli wine. There had been many changes—some good, in Bernardo's opinion, some not so good. He had seen much.

Some thought, too much.

The vines, lulled into dormancy by winter, would soon be pruned. Arthritis prevented him from doing much of the hand work, as he once had, but still, he would go out every morning to watch his sons and grandsons carry on the tradition.

A Baptista had always worked for Giambelli. And in Bernardo's mind, always would.

On this last night of his seventy-three years, he looked out over the vines—his vines, seeing what had been done, what needed to be done, and listened as the December wind whistled through the bones of the grape.

From the window where that wind tried to sneak, he could see the skeletons as they made their steady climb up the rises. They would take on flesh and life with time, and not wither as a man did. Such was the miracle of the grape.

He could see the shadows and shapes of the great *castello*, which ruled those vines, and ruled those who tended them.

It was lonely now, in the night, in the winter, when only servants slept in the *castello* and the grapes had yet to be born.

He wanted the spring, and the long summer that followed it, when the sun would warm his innards and ripen the young fruit. He wanted, as it seemed he always had, one more harvest.

Bernardo ached with the cold, deep in the bones. He considered heating some of the soup his granddaughter had brought to him, but his Annamaria was not the best of cooks. With this in mind, he made do with the cheese and sipped the good, full-bodied wine by his little fire.

He was proud of his life's work, some of which was in the glass that caught the firelight and gleamed deep, deep red. The wine had been a gift, one of many given to him on his retirement, though everyone knew the retirement was

only a technicality. Even with his aching bones and a heart that had grown weak, Bernardo would walk the vineyard, test the grapes, watch the sky and smell the air.

He lived for wine.

He died for it.

He drank, nodding by the fire, with a blanket tucked around his thin legs. Through his mind ran images of sun-washed fields, of his wife laughing, of himself showing his son how to support a young vine, to prune a mature one. Of *La Signora* standing beside him between the rows their grandfathers had tended.

Signore Baptista, she said to him when their faces were still young, we have been given a world. We must protect it.

And so they had.

The wind whistled at the windows of his little house. The fire died to embers.

And when the pain reached out like a fist, squeezing his heart to death, his killer was six thousand miles away, surrounded by friends and associates, enjoying a perfectly poached salmon, and a fine Pinot Blanc.

PART ONE

*The
Pruning*

A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots,
whose flower and fruitage is the world.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

CHAPTER ONE

The bottle of Castello di Giambelli Cabernet Sauvignon, '02, auctioned for one hundred and twenty-five thousand, five hundred dollars, American. A great deal of money, Sophia thought, for wine mixed with sentiment. The wine in that fine old bottle had been produced from grapes harvested in the year Cezare Giambelli had established the Castello di Giambelli winery on a hilly patch of land north of Venice.

At that time the *castello* had been either a con or supreme optimism, depending on your point of view. Cezare's modest house and little stone winery had been far from castlelike. But his vines had been regal, and he had built an empire from them.

After nearly a century, even a superior Cabernet Sauvignon was likely more palatable sprinkled on a salad rather than drunk, but it wasn't her job to argue with the man with the money. Her grandmother had been right, as always. They would pay, and richly, for the privilege of owning a piece of Giambelli history.

Sophia made a note of the final bid and the buyer's name, though she was unlikely to forget either, for the

memo she would send to her grandmother when the auction was over.

She was attending the event not only as the public relations executive who had designed and implemented the promotion and catalogue for the auction, but as the Giambelli family representative at this exclusive, precentennial event.

As such, she sat quietly in the rear of the room to observe the bidding, and the presentation.

Her legs were crossed in a long, elegant line. Her back convent-school straight. She wore a black pin-striped suit, tailored and Italian, that managed to look both businesslike and utterly feminine.

It was exactly the way Sophia thought of herself.

Her face was sharp, a triangle of pale gold dominated by large, deep-set brown eyes and a wide, mobile mouth. Her cheekbones were ice-pick keen, her chin a diamond point, sculpting a look that was part pixie, part warrior. She had, deliberately, ruthlessly, used her face as a weapon when it seemed most expedient.

Tools, she believed, were meant to be used, and used well.

A year before, she'd had her waist-length hair cut into a short black cap with a spiky fringe over her forehead.

It suited her. Sophia knew exactly what suited her.

She wore the single strand of antique pearls her grandmother had given her for her twenty-first birthday, and an expression of polite interest. She thought of it as her father's boardroom look.

Her eyes brightened, and the corners of her wide mouth curved slightly as the next item was showcased.

It was a bottle of Barolo, '34, from the cask Cezare had named Di Tereza in honor of her grandmother's birth. This private reserve carried a picture of Tereza at ten on the label, the year the wine had been deemed sufficiently aged in oak, and bottled.

Now, at sixty-seven, Tereza Giambelli was a legend, whose renown as a vintner had overshadowed even her grandfather's.

This was the first bottle of this label ever offered for

sale, or passed outside the family. As Sophia expected, bidding was brisk and spirited.

The man sitting beside Sophia tapped his catalogue where the photograph of the bottle was displayed. "You have the look of her."

Sophia shifted slightly, smiled first at him—a distinguished man hovering comfortably somewhere near sixty—then at the picture of the young girl staring seriously out from a bottle of red in his catalogue. "Thank you."

Marshall Evans, she recalled. Real estate, second generation Fortune 500. She made it her business to know the names and vital statistics of wine buffs and collectors with deep pockets and sterling taste.

"I'd hoped *La Signora* would attend today's auction. She's well?"

"Very. But otherwise occupied."

The beeper in her jacket pocket vibrated. Vaguely annoyed with the interruption, Sophia ignored it to watch the bidding. Her eyes scanned the room, noting the signals. The casual lift of a finger from the third row brought the price up another five hundred. A subtle nod from the fifth topped it.

In the end, the Barolo outdistanced the Cabernet Sauvignon by fifteen thousand, and she turned to extend her hand to the man beside her.

"Congratulations, Mr. Evans. Your contribution to the International Red Cross will be put to good use. On behalf of Giambelli, family and company, I hope you enjoy your prize."

"There's no doubt of it." He took her hand, lifted it to his lips. "I had the pleasure of meeting *La Signora* many years ago. She's an extraordinary woman."

"Yes, she is."

"Perhaps her granddaughter would join me for dinner this evening?"

He was old enough to be her father, but Sophia was too European to find that a deterrent. Another time, she'd have agreed, and no doubt enjoyed his company. "I'm sorry, but I have an appointment. Perhaps on my next trip east, if you're free."

"I'll make sure I am."

Putting some warmth into her smile, she rose. "If you'll excuse me."

She slipped out of the room, plucking the beeper from her pocket to check the number. She detoured to the ladies' lounge, glancing at her watch and pulling the phone from her bag. With the number punched in, she settled on one of the sofas and laid her notebook and her electronic organizer on her lap.

After a long and demanding week in New York, she was still revved and, glancing through her appointments, pleased to have time to squeeze in a little shopping before she needed to change for her dinner date.

Jeremy DeMorney, she mused. That meant an elegant, sophisticated evening. French restaurant, discussion of food, travel and theater. And, of course, of wine. As he was descended from the La Coeur winery DeMorneys, and a top account exec there, and she sprang from Giambelli stock, there would be some playful attempts to pry corporate secrets from each other.

And there would be champagne. Good, she was in the mood for it.

All followed by an outrageously romantic attempt to lure her into bed. She wondered if she'd be in the mood for that as well.

He was attractive, she considered, and could be amusing. Perhaps if they both hadn't been aware that her father had once slept with his wife, the idea of a little romance between them wouldn't seem so awkward, and somehow incestuous.

Still, several years had passed. . . .

"Maria." Sophia neatly tucked Jerry and the evening to come away, when the Giambelli housekeeper answered. "I've a call from my mother's line. Is she available?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Sophia. She hoped you would call. Just one moment."

Sophia imagined the woman hurrying through the wing, scanning the rooms for something to tidy when Pilar Giambelli Avano would have already tidied everything herself.

Mama, Sophia thought, would have been content in a little rose-covered cottage where she could bake bread, do her needlework and tend her garden. She should have had a half dozen children, Sophia thought with a sigh. And had to settle for me.

"Sophie, I was just heading out to the greenhouse. Wait. Catch my breath. I didn't expect you to get back to me so quickly. I thought you'd be in the middle of the auction."

"End of it. And I think we can say it's been an unqualified success. I'll fax a memo of the particulars this evening, or first thing in the morning. Now, I really should go back and tie up the loose ends. Is everything all right there?"

"More or less. Your grandmother's ordered a summit meeting."

"Oh, Mama, she's not dying again. We went through that six months ago."

"Eight," Pilar corrected. "But who's counting? I'm sorry, baby, but she insists. I don't think she plans to die this time, but she's planning something. She's called the lawyers for another revamp of the will. And she gave me her mother's cameo brooch, which means she's thinking ahead."

"I thought she gave you that last time."

"No, it was the amber beads last time. She's sending for everyone. You need to come back."

"All right, all right." Sophia glanced down at her organizer and blew a mental kiss goodbye to Jerry DeMorney. "I'll finish up here and be on my way. But really, Mama, this new habit of hers of dying or revamping every few months is very inconvenient."

"You're a good girl, Sophie. I'm going to leave you my amber beads."

"Thanks a bunch." With a laugh, Sophia disconnected.

Two hours later, she was flying west and speculating whether in another forty years she would have the power to crook her finger and have everyone scrambling.

Just the idea of it made her smile as she settled back with a glass of champagne and Verdi playing on the headphones.

Not everyone scrambled. Tyler MacMillan might have been minutes away from Villa Giambelli rather than hours, but he considered the vines a great deal more urgent than a summons from *La Signora*.

And he said so.

"Now, Ty. You can take a few hours."

"Not now." Ty paced his office, anxious to get back into the fields. "I'm sorry, Granddad. You know how vital the winter pruning is, and so does Tereza." He shifted the portable phone to his other ear. He hated the portables. He was always losing them. "MacMillan's vines need every bit as much care as Giambelli's."

"Ty—"

"You put me in charge here. I'm doing my job."

"Ty," Eli repeated. With his grandson, he knew, matters must be put on a very basic level. "Tereza and I are as dedicated to MacMillan wines as we are to those under the Giambelli label, and have been for twenty years. You were put in charge because you're an exceptional vintner. Tereza has plans. Those plans involve you."

"Next week."

"Tomorrow." Eli didn't put his foot down often; it wasn't the way he worked. But when necessary, he did so ruthlessly. "One o'clock. Lunch. Dress appropriately."

Tyler scowled down at his ancient boots and the frayed hems of his thick trousers. "That's the middle of the damn day."

"Are you the only one at MacMillan capable of pruning vines, Tyler? Apparently you've lost a number of employees over the last season."

"I'll be there. But tell me one thing."

"Of course."

"Is this the last time she's going to die for a while?"

"One o'clock," Eli responded. "Try to be on time."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Tyler muttered, but only after he clicked the phone off.

He adored his grandfather. He even adored Tereza, perhaps because she was so ornery and annoying. When his grandfather had married the Giambelli heiress, Tyler had

been eleven years old. He'd fallen in love with the vineyards, the rise of the hills, the shadows of the caves, the great caverns of the cellars.

And in a very real sense he'd fallen in love with Tereza Louisa Elana Giambelli, that whip-thin, ramrod-straight, somewhat terrifying figure he'd first seen dressed in boots and trousers not so different from his own, striding through the mustard plants between the rising rows of grapes.

She'd taken one look at him, lifted a razor-sharp black eyebrow and deemed him soft and citified. If he was to be her grandson, she'd told him, he would have to be toughened up.

She'd ordered him to stay at the villa for the summer. No one had considered arguing the point. Certainly not his parents, who'd been more than happy to dump him for an extended period so they could fly off to parties and lovers. So he had stayed, Tyler thought now as he wandered to the window. Summer after summer until the vineyards were more home to him than the house in San Francisco, until she and his grandfather were more parents to him than his mother and father.

She'd made him. Pruned him back at the age of eleven and trained him to grow into what he was.

But she didn't own him. It was ironic, he supposed, that all her work should have formed him into the one person under her aegis most likely to ignore her demands.

Harder, of course, to ignore the demands when she and his grandfather unified. With a shrug, Tyler started out of the office. He could spare a few hours, and they knew it as well as he. The MacMillan vineyards employed the best, and he could easily have absented himself for most of a season with confidence in those left in charge.

The simple fact was he hated the big, sprawling events the Giambellis generated. They were invariably like a circus, with all three rings packed with colorful acts. You couldn't keep track, and it was always possible one of the tigers would leap the cage and go for your throat.

All those people, all those issues, all those pretenses and smoky undercurrents. He was happier walking the