

PROLOGUE

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heaven
Satan, in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

*The baleful shadows of night lengthened, chasing the light of day into the cold darkness of Sonora, Mexico. For el andar muerto, the walking dead, it did not matter; the radiance of the sun no longer warmed their skin. For these forgotten ill-fated souls, the dying ember of another day only heralded another night of perpetual agony. As they were prodded like cattle, naked, into the camouflaged huts, they were unaware of the cold, the razor-sharp rocks that cut into the soles of their feet, or the gnawing hunger in their bellies. Their cries of suffering and agony fell upon deafened ears. Their bodies existed only to serve as slaves to *El Serpiente* and *la cocaína de diablos* — until such a time as the white powder would ravage their spiritless bodies and consume their wretched souls forever.*

The lash of a whip suddenly wrapped around the neck of an emaciated man with lifeless eyes. Without a sound, his hand absently reached to touch the smooth leather as it tightened, shutting off his air, collapsing his windpipe. His rapidly beating heart, eager to leave its hellish existence, stopped, as he sank to his knees, his hollow eyes staring into the nothingness his life had become. His insignificant remains lay disregarded as the remaining slaves filed silently past.

Beads of sweat trickled down the faces of the wary guards. One twitched nervously as he watched *El Serpiente* out of the corner of his eye, terrified that any movement would summon upon him the wrath of the devil. The crack of the split tongue of the whip over their heads left them trembling, choking on the taste of their own fear.

A taunting, cold-blooded voice sliced through the stone-still air, forewarning. “This one was weak; he didn’t last long. Clean this up, then find a replacement quickly or one of you will take his place.”

With stiff, jerking movements, two of the guards forced their frozen limbs to move. “*Sí, Jefe*, it will be done.”

Sandro, *El Serpiente*, was the devil incarnate. His dark eyes scrutinized the pure, uncut white powder, then he turned his focus to the guard standing behind him. “You are behind on production.” He did not care that recent close encounters with agents of the FBI and the Border Patrol were primarily to blame for the inroads in their processing. “Put some of your own men on the tables and send a few others out tonight to pick up new workers. Don’t raid the villages; tell them to isolate the stragglers trying to cross the border. Have the men wear their uniforms. Then if there is anyone to care that they come up missing, the attention will be on the Mexican *policía*.”

He emphasized each order by pounding the handle of the whip into the palm of his hand, and then his face took on an evil cast. His voice was a malignant sneer. “And, I am tired of the woman; she has lost her fight. Get rid of her and deliver me a new one.” He thought fleetingly of Cara; she had had plenty of fight. Knowing she was beyond his reach, he dismissed her from his mind and turned his attention back to the man standing uncertainly before him. “What are you waiting for? Get going!” He unfurled the whip and snaked it across the ground menacingly.

The guard flinched, the blood in his veins running cold as he prayed to a God that had forsaken them all.

CHAPTER ONE

Leaving behind the Santa Catalina foothills and Mount Lemmon, the private Lear jet blended into the wispy, feather-shaped clouds as the aircraft left the expanse of the Sonoran Desert and soared toward the East Coast.

Cara Vittore Cipriano was feeling jet lagged. She had flown in from Italy to complete the sale of her home in Tucson, a sale that had been pending for months just awaiting her return. When the paperwork had been completed, she had re-embarked on the Lear and left Arizona, en route to her new home on the East Coast. One hour into the flight, she received a call from Maurillio Cervantes, Cipriano Vineyards' vintner and her grandfather's oldest friend.

"Cara, it is Maurillio. Your grandfather has had a stroke. You need to come home to Cipriano as quickly as you can."

"Oh God! Is he going to be all right?"

"He is alive, and he is strong of heart and strong willed. We need you to come home, Cara."

"I'm in the air now, probably over Texas. We'll contact the appropriate authorities and change course immediately. I'm on my way."

Sebastian Cipriano had always been the bulwark of the family. He was the one who had been there for her and her three brothers when their parents were killed in an auto accident. Of his grandchildren, Cara knew she was favored, because she shared his love for the land and his passion for the grape. He had taught her everything he knew about growing the grape and making the wine. From him she'd learned how to smell the promise hidden in the rich soil and in the unborn grape as the leaves unfurled and glistened in the sunlight. And every waking minute since they had become estranged, she'd felt the guilt and pain of her tumultuous rift with her grandfather. Now, as she looked out the window of the aircraft, she couldn't shake the haunting feeling that she was in a race against time. *I hope we haven't waited too long to make our peace.*

Without a moment's hesitation, Cara ordered the plane to divert west toward the coastal paradise of Santa Barbara, the American Riviera, nestled at the foot of the Santa Ynez Mountains.

Cara laid her head against the glass and stared out the window into the white nothingness that mirrored her life. Fatigue blurred her thoughts: her grandfather and his health; the sale of her home; and the sharp ache that was the loss of the woman she was leaving behind in Arizona, Jake — the woman she loved.

Cara retrieved the cell phone from her briefcase and flipped it open, then dialed a number. Her finger poised over the send button, hesitating just as she had every other time. Not a day had passed during the year since she had left Arizona that Cara hadn't wanted to pick up the phone to call Jake. She wanted to explain why she had left without a word, to tell her that she loved and needed her more than she had ever needed anyone in her life. But how could she ask for Jake's understanding, for her forgiveness, when she couldn't forgive herself? Cara slowly closed the cell phone. Wrapped in thought, she didn't hear her assistant approach and was startled to hear her voice. "Can I get you anything, Cara?"

Without taking her eyes from the window, she answered, "No, Sorrin. I'm fine, thank you."

As the hum of the jet engine hurtled her closer to the past, memories tumbled from the haunted recesses of her mind, one after another, like dominos. She pushed aside all thoughts of Jake and her mind went back to Cipriano, to a happier time — the summer after she had graduated from high school, just before she had left for college. A time when what had happened between her and her best friend, Maggie, had irrevocably changed the destiny of so many. Cara sighed at the remembering.

Growing up, her younger brother Stephen, Cara, and Maggie were inseparable. Stephen hero-worshipped his big sister, but he adored Maggie. That summer he was taking a junior oenology class at the University of California-Davis, where he wanted to study viticulture. Cara and Maggie spent most of their days together, dreading the end of summer when Cara was to leave for Harvard. The last weekend of summer vacation, the two girls planned a day of riding and a clambake at the beach.

It was the time of day when the setting sun cast an ephemeral light on everything it touched. Gentle waves lapped at the shore while sea birds floated on invisible currents, and Magdalene Santini was simply magnificent. The soft summer breeze tossed her sun-kissed brown hair, and the surf spraying against her golden skin made it glisten in the sunlight.

“Last one to the old piece of driftwood has to dig the pit,” Maggie yelled to Cara as she snatched up the burlap sack filled with the clams they had dug, jumped on her horse bareback, and raced headlong down the beach to their favorite spot, where they played in the surf and built a fire.

After they ate, Maggie lay beside Cara on the warm sand, looking up at the dark velvet sky as stars began to appear. “I can’t believe you’ll be gone in a few days. I’m going to miss you terribly. What will I do without you?”

“It won’t be forever, Maggie. Besides, you have Stephen. He already follows you around like a puppy dog. Hey, look.” Cara pointed to a falling star. “Make a wish, quick, and it will come true.”

Maggie shut her eyes, crossed her fingers, and rolled over onto her stomach, leaning on her elbows to face Cara. She leaned over to whisper, “You could make my wish come true.”

Even in the faint, dusky light of sunset, Cara could see Maggie’s unusual, light blue eyes darken. She felt the pull of those eyes like an ocean current dragging a struggling swimmer down deeper into its depths. Her heart stood still as Maggie’s words sparked a sensation that raced down her spine and ended in an inferno in her groin.

“It isn’t Stephen I want, Cara Cipriano. It’s you.”

The dawn of the next day found Maggie in Cara’s arms as they huddled under a blanket on the beach. The only warmth was from each other’s body heat and the last of the dying embers in the campfire.

“Will your mother be worried, Maggie?”

Maggie cuddled closer to Cara, afraid that she was on the verge of crying. “No. She knew I was with you and would probably spend the night at Cipriano.”

Her heart aching, Cara held Maggie’s hand. Their futures were pre-determined, and they both knew that this would likely be the only time they would ever be together like this. That star-filled night on an empty stretch of beach, each young woman had willingly given her virginity to the other under a blood-red moon. That one night of sweet, youthful abandon changed the threads of destiny and set in motion a course of destruction.

“I suppose we’d better head home.” Maggie’s voice shook with emotion. She knew, as did Cara, what was expected of her and that what her heart wanted would never be allowed.

Through her own misty eyes, Cara gently traced a tear as it ran down Maggie’s cheek. “Please don’t cry, Maggie. I can’t bear to see you cry.”

Maggie lifted Cara’s fingers to her mouth and softly kissed them. “I will never be sorry for last night, Cara.”

Cara wondered if Maggie was still in Santa Barbara or if she lived at Santini Vineyards, the estate next to Cipriano that was owned by Maggie’s family. The enigmatic Armanno Santini was, in the eyes of the corporate world, the successful CEO of the international Santini Imports. When the property adjacent to Cipriano had been up for sale, Armanno bought it and created Santini Vineyards. It was his respite, a

sanctuary for his family, away from prying eyes and the clandestine life Armanno led, a life that his family knew little about.

Sebastian Cipriano and Maggie's father, Armanno Santini, had grown up together in the province of Cuneo in Piedmont in northwest Italy, an area rich in the tradition of world-class vineyards. Both worked by the sides of their fathers, who passed down to their sons the secrets of Italy's finest wines. The desire to create an award-winning wine was instilled in each, as was a passion and love for the grape. And in the old way, the two friends had pledged a joining between the Cipriano and Santini families. *And no one stands in the way of tradition.*

Cara's thoughts went back to her last night in Cambridge and the last time she saw McKenzie, the woman who had been her friend, mentor, and her lover.

McKenzie planned a small gathering of their friends at the Keltic Knot, the night before Cara was to leave Cambridge for California and home. There were tears and good-byes and promises to keep in touch. She missed having her family at the gathering, but was looking forward to seeing them soon. When Cara had talked to Stephen a few weeks earlier, he told her that their grandfather was ailing. She had suggested to Stephen that he and grandfather forego coming to Cambridge for her graduation and that they celebrate when she got home. Stephen reluctantly agreed.

After everyone had left, they locked up the pub and went upstairs to McKenzie's apartment. Cara's plane was leaving early in the morning. It had been a difficult week. McKenzie's decision to stay in Boston and not go with Cara and start a new practice in Santa Barbara was difficult for both of them. McKenzie started to cry when she looked at Cara's suitcases sitting on the floor in the corner of her bedroom.

With her own emotions bringing tears to her eyes, Cara took McKenzie in her arms and held her close. "You sure you won't change your mind and come with me? I know you'd love Santa Barbara and southern California."

McKenzie didn't answer for a minute as she searched Cara's face. "Darling, what would you tell your family, your grandfather? How would you explain me? I don't think your brothers or your grandfather would open their arms to your lesbian lover, now would they? I love you, baby; you know that. But I've been out since I was in high school and I couldn't pretend not to be who I am. Besides I have a good future at the firm and a good chance of making partner one day. I want to be with you, but I just can't give my life up here and go to California. And I don't want to make your homecoming more difficult."

Cara knew that everything McKenzie was saying was right, but it didn't make their separation any easier. She pulled her tighter and kissed her. "Let's go to bed. I want to make love to you until it's time to leave for the airport."

McKenzie's fingers were already on the buttons of Cara's blouse as she kissed Cara's collarbone, then the underside of her chin. "Every time I looked at you tonight, that's all I wanted to do. I thought the party would never end. I wish this night could last forever."

Their lovemaking was urgent and passionate, then gentle and tender. McKenzie was lying in Cara's arms when Cara's cell rang. It was her brother Stephen. He was so excited, he was babbling and she could barely understand him.

"I couldn't wait until you got home tomorrow, sis! She said yes, Cara. I didn't think I had a chance, I didn't think she'd ever...I've wanted..."

Cara laughed. "Slow down, bro, I can't figure out what you're trying to say." She heard him take a deep breath to calm himself, and when his voice came again, he spoke with exaggerated slowness.

"Maggie...says...she'll...marry...me," he said. "Can you believe it?"

Cara felt a brief pang of loss and knew that tears were forming in her eyes. "Oh, Stephen, I'm so happy for you. She's way too good for you, ya know."

"I know, sis, and I'm going to do everything I can to make her happy."

When she hung up the phone, Cara saw McKenzie looking at her expectantly. "Stephen," she said simply.

"The look on your face says it wasn't an ordinary call from your brother. Is it your grandfather?" McKenzie asked with concern.

Cara shook her head. "It wasn't about Grandfather. In fact, he's probably thrilled about Stephen's news."

McKenzie remained silent, waiting for Cara to continue at her own pace.

When at last she continued, her voice was full of emotion. "I think I may have mentioned the Santinis, the family with the vineyard next to ours."

With a wry grin, McKenzie said, "You've mentioned Maggie more than once."

"Hey, that was a long time ago. There was no way either of our families would have allowed us to pursue what happened that one night on the beach."

"Easy, darlin'," McKenzie soothed. "I know that you and Maggie are just friends. So, what's up with Stephen, and what does it have to do with the Santinis?"

Cara took a deep breath. "Maggie and Stephen are getting married."

"What! But I thought—"

"Water under the bridge. I'm happy for them. I know that they've been friends forever; what better basis to build a marriage on."

McKenzie shot a sharp look at Cara. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Not like you're thinking. It's actually a good thing for me, too."

"Because?" McKenzie asked.

"Because I'm promised to her brother, Robert." When McKenzie opened her mouth to interject, Cara smiled wryly. "When Armanno steps down, Robert will take over Santini Imports and Vineyards. My grandfather and Armanno arranged the marriage when we were children. It's supposed to cement the bond between Cipriano and Santini." Cara stopped, her thoughts on Maggie and the single night they had spent together. "From that moment on the beach in Maggie's arms, I knew I wouldn't want to marry Robert or any man. Now that Stephen and Maggie are engaged, I'm absolved of that obligation."

"And you were going to tell me all of this when?" McKenzie asked, annoyed and amused at the same time.

"Why, I'd have been proud to introduce you to my fiancé when you came out to California," Cara said smugly, gathering her lover into her arms.

Her thoughts still deep in the past, Cara recalled that last time she had gone home to Cipriano, the last few days she had been welcome there. She had her law degree in hand and was looking forward to going home, home to Santa Barbara and the gentle, rolling hills laced with vines of the sugar-laden grapes.

She'd missed the smell of the wine and the oak aging casks that mingled with the ocean breezes permeating the air of Cipriano. She longed to hear the sound of her grandfather's voice as he spoke of his vision for the virgin wine country. The look of love in his eyes, when he stood each morning at dawn gazing out across the land to the grapevines, was forever etched into her memory. So was that last night, the eve of Stephen's wedding to Maggie. Stephen had gone off to his bachelor party, and Cara had retired early, wanting to be ready for the ceremony. She had been asleep for some time when she sensed that she was not alone and awakened with a start. Maggie was lying next to her.

"Maggie? What the hell...?" Cara rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "Did I oversleep? It can't be time already." She searched Maggie's face. "What are you doing here?"

Maggie sighed. "I just wanted to...be close to you. We haven't had any time to really...talk since you've been home, catch up on things, you know? And after tomorrow...today..."

Cara propped her pillows against the headboard, leaned against them, and drew Maggie close. "I know. I'm sorry for that. It's been such a whirlwind — getting ready for the wedding, getting adjusted to overseeing the vineyard. But I'm glad you've come."

The two friends reminisced, laughed, and shed a few tears, and Maggie fell asleep lying in Cara's arms. That's how Stephen found them the next morning when he burst into Cara's room to have her help him fix his tie.

Stephen stared at Maggie, then at his sister, his happiness turning to confusion, and then to hurt. "My God! Paolo told me that you two...that..." He scrubbed a trembling hand over his face. "I didn't believe... But I should have known. Should have known I was second choice." He turned around and bolted from the room as quickly as he had entered.

Cara would never forget the look on his face. She never had the chance to tell her brother that what he saw was two dear friends holding each other, sharing the memories of their childhood. It was the last time she saw Stephen alive. He was apparently speeding when he missed a corner along one of the cliffs on the coastal road.

Devastated, Cara blamed herself for his death, and so did her grandfather. Her brother Paolo, spiteful because their grandfather had chose Cara to be Padrone instead of him, made sure that Sebastian knew of Cara's preferences, as well. Despondent at Stephen's death and rejected by her beloved grandfather, Cara left California and established herself with a law firm in Tucson, Arizona.

The headache that had been threatening began to pound at Cara's temples as she rested her forehead on the cool glass of the window. Circumstances had caused her and McKenzie to follow their separate paths, so she had thrown all of her energies into her law practice. Her career had flourished in Arizona, while her personal life had not. Until she and Jake...

Cara was defending a young Hispanic soldier accused of a brutal killing and dismemberment of a young Hispanic woman. The hideous murder had been linked to several others along the U.S. Mexican Border. Jake, Jacquelyn Lee Biscayne, one of the FBI's best forensic pathologists and profilers, was investigating the serial killings. Cara and Jake, who had butted heads during a previous case, generated instant fireworks. Sparks flew, then they fell passionately in love.

Sorrin's voice interrupted the bittersweet journey into the past. "We'll be landing in a few minutes, Cara. The two cars you requested are standing by. Mr. Cervantes contacted the pilot and said to apologize that he couldn't meet you himself, but he is at the hospital."

"Did he say if my grandfather was all right? Has his condition changed?"

Sorrin smiled, anxious to alleviate Cara's anxiety. "He said that your grandfather is holding his own."

Some of the tension left Cara's body as she eased back into the seat. "Thank you, Sorrin. Will you be all right if I go straight to the hospital? I depend on you to take care of—"

"That's what I'm here for. You needn't worry, Cara. I knew you would want to get to the hospital as soon as you could. Everything will be taken care of."

"Thank you, Sorrin."

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The elevator stopped on the third floor of the Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital. Cara stepped into the dimly lit corridor and stopped at the reception desk outside the ICU. The volunteer directed her through the double doors, and Cara hurried past shadowy figures and rooms with unfamiliar sounds of pinging machines toward the circular nursing station.

A haggard-looking man dressed in scrubs glanced up from a row of monitors. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Cara Cipriano. My grandfather, Sebastian Cipriano, is a patient here. Can you tell me his condition and what room he's in?" Before the man could answer, Cara heard Maurillio's familiar voice.

"Cara! *Bambina amata*, you are here! Come, we will talk, but first I will take you to see your grandfather."

Her eyes focused on the still figure lying in the bed, Cara stopped and drew in a deep breath before she entered the darkened hospital room. The sight of the frail body, so pale and vulnerable, caused her to lean against the door frame for support. Despite his oxygen mask, Cara could see that one side of her grandfather's face was drooping. Multiple plastic bags of fluid were infusing through tubes attached to his body. As she stood in the shadows, unabashed tears ran down her face and a sob caught in her throat.

Cara's unsteady legs took her slowly across the room and she stood helplessly looking down at the beloved grandfather she hadn't seen for so many years. An unbearable ache and ineffable warmth filled her heart as she gathered his bony hand — the hand that had guided her so lovingly through the years — and

brought it to her trembling lips. Her eyes never left his face as her fingers combed through his silvered hair. She wept for the lost years with him and for all of the losses in her life — for Jake and for Stephen. “Oh, Grandfather, I love you so. I am so sorry I wasn’t here for you. Please forgive me.”

Cara sat in the antiseptic hospital room holding her grandfather’s hand until the first light of dawn. She felt the aloneness known only to those who had abandoned their faith and beliefs. Maurillio’s soft voice and gentle touch on her shoulder reminded her that she had come home for yet another reason, and she needed to find out what it was.

“Come, Cara. You are tired. I will take you home. We will talk on the way.” The old foreman’s gentle eyes could not disguise the tempered steel in his voice when he added, “And then I have something I must show you, *Padrone*.”

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The rising sun was beginning to lighten the horizon over the gray expanse of the Pacific Ocean as Cara leaned her tired head back against the seat. The muffled sound of the waves soothed her as they drove along the winding stretch of coastal road that would take them to Cipriano Vineyards. As far as the eye could see, there were gently sloping vine-covered hills. Grape-laden vines with their outstretched arms seemed to be welcoming Cara home. As they drove past a field of Merlot grapes, it saddened Cara to remember the day the first vines had been planted so many years ago. It was her and Stephen’s project; they had worked alongside each other planting those vines.

Maurillio knew what she was thinking. “You have blamed yourself long enough for Stephen’s death, Cara. It is time to let it go.”

Cara’s eyes clouded with regret. “You don’t know what happened, Maurillio. I was responsible for Stephen running off the way he did the day he died. If only I had—”

“I do not know exactly what happened, Cara, but long before you left for college, I was well aware of what was between you and Maggie. Anyone with eyes could see Maggie loved you as Stephen loved her. But she would have followed the dictates of tradition; she would have been a good wife to him. Stephen made a rash judgment; he was the one responsible for what happened. Everyone has suffered enough. You cannot change the past; all you can do is go on with your life. Your grandfather needs you, now more than ever. Strange things have been happening, and he had not been well long before this stroke.”

“Strange things? What do you mean, Maurillio, what things?”

“Accidents, new workers that do not have a care about the grape or the quality of the wine or the reputation of Cipriano. I found something by chance, Cara. You need to see.”

“This thing you found, have you discussed it with Paolo and Giancarlo? Paolo has taken over the daily operation, has he not?”

“Paolo assumed the responsibility of the daily operations and Giancarlo oversees the business end, but your brothers have always known that they were just the caretakers of the vineyards in your absence. Despite Stephen’s death and your...departure, your grandfather never revoked his decision to give you control of Cipriano. And now, *Malocchio* lurks in the shadows. Something is not right, Cara. I did not want to discuss this with your brothers until I talked to you.

Cara was surprised by Maurillio’s words. She had assumed that after her grandfather had banished her from Cipriano, he would choose one of her brothers to replace her as *padrone*. She well remembered one of the proudest days of her life.

She was surprised to see her grandfather riding out to meet her as she came in from checking a section of newly planted grapevines. The day was breezy, warm even. The new grape leaves were just unfurling to shimmer in the glistening morning

sunlight. She loved the smells of the rich earth and the pliant new leaves as they mingling together. A tall, gangly fifteen-year old, she listened intently to his every word. As they rode side by side, he talked about the latest graftings the vineyard had just received from Italy. They dismounted and stood looking over the vineyards.

Her grandfather smiled down at her. "One day, Cara, this will all be yours."

"What do you mean, Grandfather?"

"When I am no longer to work the land, you will be padrone of Cipriano."

She stood silent, stunned. Her grandfather was breaking with tradition. He had not chosen one of her brothers to take over as padrone, but her. She was unable to wrap her mind around words that were so foreign to her thinking — she, a woman as padrone.

"Why me? Better yet, how me? Don't you have to name Paolo? Or even Giancarlo, if Paolo declines to take on his responsibilities as eldest?"

"Ah, bella mia, dolce mia, your brothers, they do not feel the life of the grape flow within their veins. They are not aware of the beat of the earth underneath their feet as she pumps life up into every vine. Only you, Cara. You feel the very life of the land herself in every grape we harvest. You sense it in the bouquet of each bottling. She entices you. She melts into you as a woman melts into her lover. Your brothers, they do not even comprehend the sensations you revel in when we walk the vineyard together, when we taste the new vintages. They feel only the intoxication of the alcohol, not the sweet sensation of the wine swirling within their mouths. But you, dolce mia, you allow the vines to take you into their arms and gently offer their delights." A wistful look flickered in the old man's eyes. "I know the feelings well. Therefore, Cara Vittore Cipriano, you will be the next padrone of Cipriano. There is no other choice, for the land seems to have laid claim to you long ago. I merely carry the message for her."

And now Maurillio had said that, despite their estrangement, her grandfather still wanted her to be padrone. His voice penetrated her shock.

"There is more you should know before we reach the house, Cara."

Cara turned her tired eyes toward Maurillio and held her breath, bracing herself, praying for the inner strength to deal with whatever he might say.

"It's Maggie. She is married and has a daughter who is five years old."

Shock registered on Cara's face. "Five years old? Maurillio, how...? Stephen died just over five years ago." The realization slammed Cara in the gut. "Oh my God! Is the child Stephen's?"

Maurillio's weathered, worried face brightened when he spoke of the child. "Oh yes, Cara. She is without question Stephen's."

"How long has she been married, Maurillio? Is she happy?" Maurillio's eyes lost their smile and the hardened look on his face alarmed Cara.

"She married three years ago. I am sorry — your grandfather did not want you to know. He forbade anyone to tell you. The child is your niece, Cara. And as much as she looks like Stephen, she is the spitting image of you at that age."

Cara was dazed as she tried to process all that Maurillio was telling her. *Was Maggie going to marry Stephen because she was pregnant? Did he know? Oh, Stephen, why didn't you give me a chance to explain?* The torment Cara felt was almost too much to bear. As they drove along the road through the vineyards leading to Cipriano Villa, she had one last question. "What is the child's name, Maurillio?"

"Sebastiana Vittore Cipriano." A proud smile beamed from Maurillio's face. "But she has chosen to be called Tiana."

When Maurillio pulled into the driveway of the main house he got out of the car and was unloading Cara's luggage when one of the workers approached him and offered to help.

"Buenos dias. Can I help you, Jefe?"

"Sí, gracias, Humberto, please take Ms. Cipriano's luggage up to her rooms in the east wing."

Cara grabbed one of her suitcases and started to follow Humberto. "I will be down in a few minutes, Maurillio."

Maurillio was waiting anxiously when she returned. As she approached him, she noticed for the first time how old he looked. *So many years, has it been that long?* The look on Maurillio's face and the seriousness in his voice forced away the memories of happier times at Cipriano.

"Come, I need to show you something."

Difficult memories and the emotions they evoked haunted Cara as they walked the familiar path to the cavernous aging room. Maurillio led the way to the area where they stored the wine barrels slated for recycling. They would be sold at a fraction of their original cost, but Sebastian Cipriano felt that it enabled smaller wineries to have access to quality barrels.

"You know, Cara, the barrels are ordered at the same time every year to replace the ones that are to be recycled. Recently I signed for a shipment of new barrels, though I did not remember ordering them. I keep good records; I pulled the purchase order. It was not a mistake. It was my name, but it was not me who signed the order. I came to check on the shipment of the recycled barrels and discovered that they were going to a winery I do not know."

Cara listened intently and watched as Maurillio retrieved a small crowbar from a shelf and pried the top off one of the barrels, revealing a hidden compartment.

"And I found this." He reached inside and retrieved three black plastic bundles. "There are more in the other barrels." He reached into his pocket for a knife and slit a small hole in one of the bundles.

Cara's hand trembled as she wet her little finger and brought a small sample of the white powder to her tongue. Her legal work had provided her with a necessary education in the world of drugs. "It's cocaine."

"I suspected it was. I have asked a few of the faithful workers who have been with us a long time whether they knew or heard of anything unusual going on at the vineyards, but no one will say anything. Still, I see the fear in their eyes."

A stunned look crossed Cara's face. "Who is doing this? Do you know who is involved, Maurillio? Does my grandfather know about this?"

"No, Cara! I feared it would kill him." Maurillio fell silent and appeared uncomfortable as he looked toward the ground.

Cara's mind reeled at the implications of what Maurillio had told her. Her brown eyes deepened to almost black. She suddenly realized why Maurillio had not confided in her brothers. "Which one? Which one of my brothers has done this?"

"I wish I knew. I have my suspicions. Paolo is in debt; he spends far too much time drinking and gambling in Vegas. Giancarlo bought an expensive home in Montecito; he has too many women and a garage full of expensive cars. Life at Cipriano has changed since you left, Cara. It is not what you remember. Your grandfather's health has not been good for a long time. The stroke is just the most recent and the worst of his illnesses. And now this." He gestured to the white powder.

Outrage seethed beneath the surface as Cara replaced the bag and repositioned the top of the barrel. When she looked at Maurillio, there was a dead calm in her eyes. Then in a voice that had struck fear into many an opponent in the courtroom, she said, "I'm home now, Maurillio. I will make it unquestionably clear that I am assuming control of Cipriano. I promise you that I will find out who is behind this, but for now, let's keep it to ourselves."

The winemaker shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Cara, there is one more thing I need to tell you before we go up to the house."

She eyed the old man with an uneasy feeling.

"Maggie is married to your brother Paolo. She and Tiana live here at Cipriano."