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Chapter One

Gatti Family Villa Near Verona, Italy, September 1, 1753

Marietta Gatti smashed a pea with the back of her silver spoon. Across the mahogany dining table, her husband Dario's unfaithful eyes simmered with lust as the young maid served the evening meal. When the girl replenished his crystal wine glass, his fingertips brushed against her skin, lingering longer than well-bred manners allowed. Marietta fisted the linen napkin in her lap while Dario's parents, sitting on opposite ends of the table, ignored the antics of their only child.

The maid's rosy cheeks and full pouty lips reflected the child she once was, but her body showed the curves of the woman she would be. Dario liked them young, naïve, and fully ripe for the picking—as a barely fifteen-year-old Marietta was when they first met.

Drawn to his thick, dark eyelashes and heavy coin purse, these girls came willingly to Dario. Six . . . seven . . . eight . . . Marietta crushed a pea for each dalliance in their five long years of marriage. When she finished the tally, only two peas remained whole. At least his affairs kept him out of her bed most nights.

Admittedly, she welcomed his affections at first, considering she was the daughter of an artist who hadn't painted in two years. Dario courted her as any other respectable nobleman would with nights at the opera in Venice and strolls by the Grand Canal on Sunday afternoons. However, he couldn't conceal his faults forever, and when they became obvious, she wanted no part of the man. By then, it was too late. Her father insisted a bad marriage was better than starvation, and she couldn't change his mind.

Dario's disrespect bothered her the most. Her father cherished her mother until the devastating day that she died when Marietta was only thirteen. She assumed her own marriage would be the same, full of love and laughter, but it wasn't. Now, she spent her days and nights trying to survive the cold-heartedness of the Gatti family.

Marietta relaxed the grip on her napkin and pushed at the lamb on her plate. When bloody juice oozed from the meat, she let out a small sigh and reached for a piece of bread instead.

At the break in the room's silence, her mother-in-law's head snapped up, almost dislodging the mountain of dark curls that compensated for her diminutive height. The black beauty patch that she carefully applied to her painted white cheek each morning twitched in displeasure before she returned her attention to her dinner.

As the older woman's teeth worked the lamb in her mouth, her bony face grew more repulsed with each chew until she finally spit into her napkin. She pointed her knife at the maid. "Where did Cook get this meat?"

Dario's latest amusement clutched the pitcher of wine to her bosom and gaped wide-eyed at the elder Signora Gatti.

Marietta's stomach churned, as it always did when La Signora's temper rose. Though the maid was inconsiderate enough to flirt in front of her, Marietta wouldn't wish her mother-in-law's anger on anyone.

When the girl couldn't find the courage to answer his mother, Dario intervened. He drained his wine glass in one gulp and held it out to give the girl something to do besides tremble. "You don't like it, Mama?"

Dario slurred his words ever so slightly, which was never good this early in the evening. If he continued to pursue the maid, she would be in for a rough night. Marietta didn't know what Dario loved more—wine or young women—but there was no denying the explosive result when the two mixed. She needed to tell the housekeeper to keep the girl busy and out of reach until the morning hours.

"It tastes spoiled." La Signora dropped her cutlery onto the plate. "Take it away."

The girl hastened to the opposite end of the table and whisked the offending food out of the room.

Dario sliced off a large piece of lamb and stuck it in his mouth. Between chews, he said, “It seems fine to me. What do you think, Papa?”

Marietta almost forgot Dario’s father was there. The old man’s chin rested on his chest, rising and falling with each soft snore. With his sparse snow-white hair and a habit of napping at will, Marietta figured he was in his early seventies, a good twenty years older than La Signora. Obviously, Dario inherited his love of young things from the man.

She sniffed at her own meat and wrinkled her nose at the odd smell emanating from it. No matter, she’d had enough, though she hated missing one of Cook’s delicious desserts. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m feeling a bit tired. I think I’ll retire early tonight.”

Her mother-in-law snorted derisively.

Dario gave her a few blurry-eyed blinks before he remembered his duty. When he stood too fast, the dinner wine rushed to his head. He grabbed the edge of the table to steady his teetering. “May I escort you upstairs?”

She shook her head. “No, please, finish your meal.”

Before Marietta reached the doorway, the maid slipped back into the dining room and reclaimed Dario’s attention. The girl’s ruined reputation was worth more than the few coins she would receive from him. But Marietta’s warnings had gone unheeded by previous maids, so she had no faith that this one would listen. She pressed her lips together to silence her frustration and gratefully left the room.

Marietta entered the breakfast room the next morning but stopped short at the sight of Dario at the table. Usually he ate much later, which allowed her to avoid him for most of the day. She took a seat and greeted him with a nod.

“You’re up early,” she finally said in the awkward silence.

He bit off a corner of toast. A few crumbs spewed from his mouth as he replied, “My stomach’s a bit queasy. I thought some food might settle it.”

When the maid entered with Marietta's pastry and coffee, Dario's head popped up. Once again, he failed to hide his admiration for the girl's ample form. His eyes roamed up and down until they settled on her bosom. Dario whispered something to the girl, and she giggled in reply. Marietta carefully stirred her drink, unwilling to watch his lecherous behavior.

The sound of jangling keys came from the hall followed by the appearance of the housekeeper in the doorway. The hunched old woman glared at the maid and then tottered away. The girl gave Dario an apologetic smile and shrugged her shoulders before she hurried after the housekeeper.

Her husband let out a long sigh. "I think I'll go back to bed." He peered in the direction of the kitchen. "Alone."

Marietta remained at the table, staring out the French doors that opened to the Verona countryside. In her mind, she changed the last few minutes of her life so that a loving husband kissed her lips and wished her a good morning. They sat side by side so their bodies could touch while they told each other their plans for the day. After this loving husband departed, her heart immediately ached, missing his presence.

Marietta frowned. There was no use in daydreaming. This was her life—like it or not. Her fingers ripped the pastry before her until it was nothing more than crumbs.

Five days had passed since their meeting in the breakfast room and Dario still kept to his bed. In her own chambers, Marietta huddled with Zeta, her maid, to hear the latest news. Only a few years younger in age, Zeta was the sister Marietta never had. Their bond of friendship forged the first night Dario left Marietta battered and weeping in her bed. The maid cleansed her wounds and held her until she slept, earning Marietta's everlasting gratitude.

In a hushed voice, the maid shared the gossip from the other servants. "His chamber pot is filled with blood. He can't eat, his skin is burning, and all he does is moan."

Marietta pulled the bedcovers to her chin. "Why haven't they called for the physician?"

"La Signora did, but the man is traveling. Cook says the old lady summoned the priest." Zeta's slender hand darted to her head, chest, and each shoulder to make the sign of the cross.

Marietta gasped.

The maid nodded.

Chewing on her thumbnail, Marietta considered this news. She couldn't count the number of times she had wished the vilest deaths on Dario. Now that her wish might come true, her legs began to quiver under the blanket.

"You haven't seen him?" Zeta asked. Her fingers tugged and twirled a lock of her blond hair in a constant rhythm.

Marietta shook her head. "Not since he took to his bed. La Signora won't let me."

"Cook denies it's her fault, but the old lady wants her head." The maid dropped the lock of hair and slashed her finger across her slender throat.

This was more bad news. Marietta liked Cook. "Dario was the only one who ate the lamb. Maybe she should run away."

Slow, heavy footsteps moved past the bedroom door, and then the smell of incense drifted into the room. "The priest," mouthed Zeta, her brown eyes widening.

Marietta sucked a drop of blood off her thumb. She hugged her knees and began to rock. "I should go to him."

"No! La Signora will—"

"How will it look to the priest and the rest of Verona if he dies and I'm not by his side?" Marietta threw back the covers and retrieved her robe. When she reached the door, she stopped, knowing Zeta was right. There would be consequences for her disobedience, but she had no choice. Her shoulders sagged, but she forced her hand to turn the doorknob. "I may hate him, but I am his wife."

That bleak fact was the only hope for her miserable future. Without Dario, she was penniless. If the Gattis turned her out, she didn't know where she would go. She hadn't spoken to her father since the wedding five years ago. She wasn't even sure he was still in Venice.

As she approached Dario's bedroom, the priest's boys stood in the doorway, facing the bed. Before anyone could object, Marietta squeezed past, but then halted in midstride. Zeta's gossip hadn't done justice to the scene before her.

On one side of the bed, La Signora knelt with head bowed. Opposite her, the plump, balding Father Calvino stood with hands raised, praying in Latin. Between them, a gaunt figure—the same shade as the white linen sheets—lay with eyes closed. The smell of feces and sweat hung in the stale air.

“Dario?” Marietta said to no one in particular.

The old lady scrambled to her feet. “Get out! You do not belong here.”

Before Dario’s valet could reach her, Marietta scooted in front of the priest. “Father, I’m his wife. Please don’t deny me a final goodbye.”

The priest paused in his prayers, confusion clouding his face. Before he could object, Marietta spun around and grabbed Dario’s hand.

“Dario,” she said again. “It’s me, Marietta.”

Her husband struggled to focus on her face.

She forced a smile. “You’re looking better.”

His lips moved soundlessly.

“What’s that, my love?” She brushed back a lock of his sticky hair, hoping the gesture looked affectionate to the priest. She had a feeling she’d need him in her corner should Dario actually die.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Do not worry. Father Calvino has already absolved you.”

His head moved fitfully from side to side. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re upsetting him.” La Signora pointed toward the door. “Leave.”

“No, no,” Dario said in a feeble voice.

Marietta lifted her husband’s hand to her chest and gave her mother-in-law a smug smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m sorry I never got to love you, my sweet Violetta.” Dario closed his eyes with a sigh. “You would have enjoyed it.”

Marietta's mouth twisted at his words.

"Who's Violetta?" Father Calvino asked, looking around the room.

Over the now lifeless body, La Signora's cold eyes met Marietta's. "Our maid."

With the arrival of relatives and visitations from neighbors, the villa had been a blur of motion the past several days. Marietta ignored it all, though, preferring to stay in her bedroom. She rubbed at the tightness in her chest and forced herself to breathe. Today's funeral would be the first time she appeared in public as a widow.

In the mirror above the dressing table, Zeta fussed with Marietta's black hat and veil. The maid clicked her tongue whenever Marietta fidgeted, which occurred every few seconds. When Marietta reached up to pull the veil lower, Zeta slapped her hand away. "Let me do my job."

Despite what the day held, Marietta smiled. If only her friend could be by her side at the funeral mass. "What time are the carriages leaving for the church?"

Zeta glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantel. "La Signora told me one o'clock. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll be down in a few minutes."

Zeta patted Marietta's shoulder before leaving the room.

Marietta remained at the dressing table, staring at her pale reflection. She never imagined that at twenty years old she'd already be a widow in black. On the bright side, she was no longer married to Dario, but her future still looked grim. She wished La Signora would at least say one way or the other whether Marietta could continue living at the family villa. The last words they exchanged were over Dario's body.

She closed her eyes and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. Take one day at a time. That's all she needed to do. She had almost calmed her fluttering stomach when the bedroom door banged open. Zeta rushed into the room. Her cheeks were flushed and her cap was askew.

"The carriages have left!" The maid hurried to the window facing the front lane.

"What? Without me? But it isn't time yet." Marietta peered over Zeta's shoulder.

“Cook said everyone left at least fifteen minutes ago. Oh, I don’t see them anymore.”
Zeta opened the window and leaned out, trying for a better view.

“Have Mario saddle my horse.”

Marietta waited until Zeta flew from the room and then sank onto the bed. So this was how it would be. At least when Dario lived, La Signora had to pretend Marietta was part of the family. Now, she was no one, left behind like a servant. She stared at the floral wallpaper until the roses blurred from her tears. Then she wiped away the wetness with shaking hands and pulled on her riding gloves.

She paused at the door and clenched her fists to still the tremors. As first a daughter, then a wife, and now a widow, she possessed few financial rights in her lifetime. It was a man’s world in all respects, but maybe she could gain the sympathy of Dario’s father. Though La Signora controlled the household, if Signor Gatti commanded it, Marietta could stay on at the villa. On her way to the stables, she pondered the best way to approach the old man.

Mario, the stable boy, shook his head as he helped her mount her horse. “*Scusimi, Signora, you shouldn’t ride today. The rains have ruined the roads.*”

“I have no choice.” She dug her heels into the horse’s side and headed toward Verona and the Catholic church the family attended.

When she arrived at San Giorgio, a footman from one of the many coaches lining the narrow street took her reins and helped her down. Except for the brief expression of shock that crossed his face, he averted his eyes and ignored the state of her widow’s weeds. Grimacing, she lifted her skirt and shook off the larger clumps of mud. At least the damage ended at her thighs.

A quick glance inside confirmed most of the townspeople had come to pay their respects and, for once, she was grateful for the church’s customary gloom. With head bowed, she made her way to the Gatti family pew only to find it filled with Dario’s parents and relatives. Marietta waited for room to be made, but La Signora, sitting closest to the aisle, simply pressed her petite hands together in prayer and looked straight ahead. Several of the more unrefined cousins shifted in their seats and craned their necks to see what would happen next, while the others studied their hymnals in earnest.

A low murmur rippled through the other mourners. Marietta's cheeks burned in embarrassment, but she held her ground. She would attend her husband's funeral from the aisle if need be. An elderly woman three rows back took pity on Marietta—or perhaps vengeance on La Signora. She tapped the man next to her with her fan and then beckoned to Marietta. With a final bitter look at her mother-in-law, Marietta grasped her soiled skirt and slid in beside the elderly woman and her family.

A few moments later, the priest and his boys filed in, while a trio of young castrati, dressed as cherubs, sang a hymn in their high soprano voices. Marietta shut out the rest of the funeral mass. Dario had sinned so often, whatever kind words Father Calvino spoke couldn't save her husband's soul. If anyone needed help now, it was she.

When it was time to say their final goodbyes, La Signora was first in line and Marietta last after the cousins. Staring down at her husband's serene face, the strength in her legs threatened to fail. Night after night during their first year of marriage, she had lain shaking in her bed. Her heart stopped at every sound. Her ears strained to hear his footfalls at her door. Eventually, her fear turned to numbness and then apathy. She gripped the sides of Dario's coffin to reassure herself that he was truly dead. Then, she lowered her face and pretended to kiss him but instead let a drop of spittle fall from her lips. As it trickled down his gray cheek, she allowed herself a small smile. Her loathsome husband would never again raise a hand to her.

The pallbearers hoisted the coffin onto their shoulders, signaling to more than a dozen paid mourners to keen and pull at their hair. The spectacle befitted someone who had lived a righteous life, yet it was all a charade. The family money could buy almost anything—anything except a place in heaven. Her husband roasted in hell.

In the fresh morning air, Marietta stood on the terrace and stared out at the villa's meticulous gardens. Two weeks had passed since Dario's burial, and she had spent the majority of the time in her bedroom waiting for some indication of what her future held. Today, La Signora broke the uneasy silence and summoned her to the salon.

She clutched her black crepe shawl tighter as the autumn wind tasted her exposed skin. Soon the brilliant orange, red, and green of the late blooming flowers and sculptured bushes

would turn a lifeless brown that matched how she felt. With a sigh, she rubbed at the dull throb in her temples.

“What are you doing out here? You were told the salon.”

The voice chilled her more than the wind. When she turned, her mother-in-law stood in the doorway, her mouth set in its usual scowl, and her clothes colored black from head to toe. Zeta had remarked that La Signora’s appearance now resembled her heart. Over the years, the woman had provided plenty of evidence to support the sentiment.

“I was only . . .” Marietta waved a hand at the late September landscape.

“Inside.” The staccato beat of La Signora’s march echoed across the marble floor.

Marietta’s head bowed in submission. She took a few steps into the salon but left the French doors open to the cool air. Across the room, the older woman sat on a damask-covered settee with her ankles crossed and feet dangling above the floor. La Signora pulled out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes, even though no actual tears had fallen since her son’s unexpected passing.

Finally, her mother-in-law spoke. “It was no secret that I was against Dario marrying you, but I’ve never been able to deny him what he wanted. I lived with the disappointment of such a lowly match all these years, doing my best to give you a good home despite your ungratefulness.”

Marietta clenched her teeth to keep silent. Her life was much better than most, but the biting insults and degrading looks her mother-in-law cast her way on a daily basis still cut deeply.

“All I ever asked from you was an heir, and you couldn’t even do that.” She shook a crooked finger at Marietta. “Now, we have no one to carry on the family name.”

At the callous reminder, Marietta’s hand found her belly. Two babies lay buried under the weeping willow tree, and her heart would forever ache from the losses. Though she had entered the marriage kicking and screaming, she had hoped for children. Fate just wasn’t on her side.

She learned long ago not to show any emotion in front of La Signora, so she breathed deeply to control her temper. When an acrid smell filled her nose, she crossed the room to peer

out the floor-length windows that ran along the side of the villa. A dozen or so large rectangular objects burned in a pile near the carriage house. When the groundskeeper poked at one of them with a rake, sparks shot high into the air. Her mouth suddenly dry, she asked, “What is Fredo burning?”

La Signora tilted her head. “Your paintings.”

The words hit her like an icy bucket of water and her body jerked backwards. Her love of painting was the only thing that kept her sane over the lonely years. To Dario’s credit, he allowed her the best materials the family’s money could buy. She had spent countless hours roaming the countryside for the perfect scene to capture, and now this spiteful old woman had destroyed her treasures. Marietta grabbed the nearest chair and dug her fingernails into its back. “Why . . . why would you do that? How can you be so cruel?”

La Signora ignored the question, her black eyes flashing with hatred. “You are no longer welcome in our home and will leave today. Signor Gatti insists on giving you a yearly stipend of 6,000 ducats.” The old woman flicked her wrist as if her husband’s offer was an offending odor that needed to be dispelled. “If it were up to me, you’d have nothing.”

Marietta silently promised to light a candle for the old man the first chance she got. It was far from a lavish amount of money, but it would ensure a roof over her head and food on the table. After Dario’s death, she had sent her father a letter addressed to the lodgings in Venice where they last stayed before her marriage, but so far, there had been no reply. If the letter reached him, perhaps he would welcome her home.

Another gust of wind entered the salon and brought Marietta to her senses. Hampered by the weight of her widow’s weeds, she hiked up her skirts and ran from the room and her vicious mother-in-law. She headed for her paintings, knowing it was already too late.

When she reached the bonfire, she gave in to the choking sobs welling up inside her. Ashes from the ruined creations swirled up in the air until gravity forced them down and onto her tear-stained cheeks in a sooty goodbye kiss.

Fredo rubbed a sleeve across his eyes and then pulled his hat down low. “*Mi dispiace*, Signora. They were pretty.”

Marietta wrapped her arms around herself and nodded at his kind words, but as paper curled and paint melted, her heart hardened. Her life here had ended and so would her false mourning. She grasped the bodice of her black gown and tore it open until the gown slid off her hips.

Perhaps fearing she intended to join her paintings, Fredo took a quick step toward her. In his haste, he tripped over the spikes of his rake and landed on the ground with a thud. He scuttled on all fours trying to reach her. “No, no, Signora!”

With a final cry, she threw the heavy dress on top of the remains of her landscapes. The wool quickly burned as the fire raced across the coarse fabric. She shivered in her undergarments, listening to the fire crackle and pop, until all that remained were burning embers, and then the world went black.

When Marietta’s eyes opened, she was in her own bed. The smell of smoke on her shift and in her hair confirmed that the bonfire hadn’t been a terrible nightmare. She covered her face with her soot-stained hands and blew out a long anguished breath. Her paintings were gone.

Overcome with fury, she pounded the bed with her fists, but it didn’t ease her rage. Her mother-in-law’s words sounded in her head and she shot up. Three trunks stood in a row at the foot of her bed, as if standing guard while she slept. A wave of nausea swept over her. She clamped a hand over her mouth and tried to swallow the burning liquid forcing its way up her throat.

“Zeta! I’m going to be sick!”

Before the maid could help, Marietta grabbed a porcelain bowl from the bedside table and retched up the meager remains of her last meal. She fell back against the pillows and wiped her mouth with the corner of the sheet. Her eyes found the trunks again. “Are they packed?”

Zeta’s face reflected a mixture of guilt and misery. “La Signora ordered me.”

Marietta gave her a weak smile. “I understand.”

“Shall I help you get dressed? The carriage is waiting. La Signora said it will take you to Verona but no farther.”

Marietta held up her soiled hands. “Do I have time to wash before I’m exiled?”

While she waited for Zeta to clean the bowl, Marietta examined her face in the mirror. If it weren’t for the dark circles around her eyes and the splotches of soot, her bloodless complexion could have passed for one of the popular, white carnival masks everyone would wear in a few weeks. When she ran a brush through her blond hair, ash floated to the floor. Maybe Zeta could perform a small miracle. Marietta preferred departing the villa with some dignity instead of looking like the riffraff her mother-in-law claimed she was.

Her mind raced to form some sort of plan. She needed to buy passage on a coach from Verona to Venice. Though she never had to handle such arrangements, it couldn’t be too difficult to do. Then, she needed to find suitable lodgings. She could try where her father and she had last lived, but she remembered it as a dilapidated place. Her father had been a successful painter of portraits and frescos, but after her mother’s death, he had lost his passion. When he agreed to Marietta’s marriage, they were at the end of their savings, scrimping to get by each day. Maybe she should find rooms elsewhere and then approach her father—if she could find him.

Take one day at a time. How many times had she told herself that since her marriage to Dario?

Zeta returned with another plain dress made of black muslin. Marietta shook her head at it. “No, I will wear the blue silk with gold trim.”

The young woman gave her a conspirator’s grin and tossed the rejected dress on the bed. An hour later, Marietta stood fully dressed with hair curled and powdered. The French dress was one of her favorites, as it brought out the color of her sapphire blue eyes and made her smallish bosom look exceptional. She adjusted the mass of ruffles that fell from her elbows and then thanked Zeta. “I feel better already.”

The maid nipped the extra material at the sides of the dress with her fingers. “Forgive me for saying, but you’re losing too much weight. You must promise to eat more.”

“Maybe once I’m away from La Signora I’ll regain my appetite.”

Zeta frowned. “It’s not right—her turning you out like this. Where will you go?”

Marietta gazed out the window at the Verona countryside she had grown to love through her painting. “I’m going home to Venice.”

“What if you don’t find your father? Who will take care of you?”

Marietta reached for her friend’s hands. “Zeta, I couldn’t have survived living here without you, but now I must take care of myself.” It sounded braver than she felt. She had no desire to remain at the villa, but she also remembered how it felt to be hungry and poor.

A sharp rap on the door silenced them.

“It’s time,” her friend whispered, tears pooling in her eyes.

Marietta gathered Zeta in her arms and gave her one last hug. “I’m ready.”