

# Chapter One

The Siena countryside was breathtaking. The narrow road twisted and turned. Neatly trained grapevines faded from view, then reappeared on the next hill. Row upon row of olive trees were broken here and there by stone cottages. Angela's Uncle Giorgio gave her a running commentary on each farm they passed, outlining the marriages, divorces, births and deaths of each family.

"This," he said with a sweep of his arm, "is Tuscany, Angie."

Angela watched a dapple-grey horse gallop through a distant field. His long tail streamed behind him as he ran. He kicked up his heels and tossed his head. Angela couldn't take her eyes off him as they drove by. "What a beautiful horse!" she exclaimed, turning to her uncle.

“Everybody knows that horse.” He shook his head. “That’s Tempesta, a crazy horse!”

“Who does he belong to?”

“That’s the Barazza *allevamento*—a horse ranch. Maybe you don’t remember. You visit here with your mother when you were small. Many of Barazza’s horses have raced in the *Palio*. It’s the biggest event in Siena. This is the best time to visit. This year with a little divine luck our neighbourhood *contrada*, the Unicorns, will win. For four years in a row, we have drawn a slow horse.” He grasped the small icon of the Virgin Mary swinging from the rear-view mirror and brought it to his lips. “Divine Mary, Mother of God, bless the Unicorns with a fast horse.”

“Could we stop and see the horses?” Angela asked, excited at the prospect. Although she had only arrived in Italy the week before, she had already begun to miss the stables and the horses back home in Canada.

“Sure,” Giorgio said, smiling at her. “Barazza is a good friend of mine.”

Giorgio turned the truck into a narrow lane, sped up a shaded driveway that led to an old farmhouse and came to a halt in a cloud of dust. The old house was flanked on one side by a grove of olive trees and on the other by a fenced paddock where several horses grazed. Behind the house, a little to the right, were the stables. As her uncle turned off the engine, a tall man appeared in the doorway, squinting

into the late-afternoon sun. His thick dark hair glinted in the light, and he walked with purpose.

“Ah, Giorgio!” he called out in a strong voice.

Giorgio opened the truck door, stepped out and extended his hand. “Cesare, it’s good to see you,” he said.

“And you,” Barazza said, grasping Giorgio’s hand. “Is this Angela, Kate’s daughter?” he asked, peering into the window.

Giorgio nodded proudly. “This is our Angela.”

“You’re all grown up,” Barazza said in English. “Your aunt and uncle are so happy you have come to visit.”

Angela smiled and climbed out of the truck.

“You look very much like your mother,” Barazza continued. “How is she?”

“She’s fine,” Angela replied.

“Angela wanted to stop and see the horses,” Giorgio said.

“Certainly, certainly. Make yourself at home.”

“You go ahead and look at the horses, Angela, while Cesare and I discuss the *Palio*,” Giorgio said as he followed Barazza to the house.

Angela wandered over to the paddock and leaned on the fence, feeling the intensity of the sun on her back. She ran her fingers through her hair, trying to smooth the inevitable stray wisps that always seemed to stick up in all the wrong places. She was thankful she had cut her hair short before

leaving Vancouver, even though her mother had been upset when she had seen it. It was much easier to take care of in the heat.

Angela's last words to her mother had been harsh, and she was secretly glad to be away for a while. Their relationship had alternated between stony silences and yelling matches since the death of Angela's father. Her mother had reacted to becoming a widow by withdrawing from the world. Angela wondered if she'd ever again have the mother she had once known. She missed her old life when the three of them had been together.

Angela spied Tempesta, the grey dapple that she'd seen from the road. He was galloping with several other horses along the fence on the far side of the paddock. The allevamento was definitely a horse's paradise, with plush green fields that stretched for miles. Tempesta easily outdistanced the others. He had a proud way of holding his head up that made Angela think of the Lipizzaner stallions from Vienna.

The dapple was followed by a tall raw-boned mare the colour of chocolate. Her heavy hooves thudded across the turf, and her long thick neck stretched out. She could almost keep up with Tempesta as he raced around the paddock, but it was obvious that it took great effort. When Tempesta neared Angela, he stopped in his tracks, blowing sharp gusts of air out his nostrils. As the clumsy mare thundered

past, the dapple fixed his eyes on Angela. His gaze never faltered as she bent down and slid through the fence. His coat quivered and his head bobbed up and down.

When Angela extended her hand, Tempesta tossed his head and snorted, eyeing her warily. His nostrils twitched, but he didn't bolt. Closer and closer Angela edged, all the while murmuring softly, "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

She reached out to touch his velvety nose. Suddenly, Tempesta snorted and galloped away.

Annoyed, Angela turned and saw a tall young man approaching the paddock. He had broad shoulders and thick dark hair that curled at his collar.

"Wow! That's impressive! He rarely lets strangers approach him. You must have a special touch."

"How did you know I speak English?" Angela asked, climbing back over the paddock fence. Since she'd arrived in Siena, she'd struggled with Italian, trying to remember what little her mother had taught her.

"I heard you talking with Barazza," he said, smiling and offering her his hand. "I'm Tony."

"Angela," she replied, placing her hand in his. "Do you work here?" His grip was warm and firm.

"I come to ride, to practise for the Palio," he said, holding her hand tightly. "I'm a *fantino*, a jockey. I ride the racing circuit all around Tuscany, and this year I'm going to win the Palio." He let go of her hand and nodded toward the

dapple prancing across the field. “He’s a real devil,” he said with a deep throaty laugh.

“There’s something special about him,” Angela said, gazing at Tempesta.

“He’s fast, but too unpredictable, too temperamental.” Tony leaned forward and rested his arms on the fence next to Angela’s as Tempesta cantered past them, tossing his head from side to side. “He’d make a good racehorse—too bad.”

Tony turned to Angela. “Do you ride back home?”

“Yes, I...I do,” she stammered, annoyed at herself for feeling intimidated by this lean young man with the brazen attitude.

“Your father own a ranch?”

“No, we live in the city.” She lowered her eyes to the ground, scuffing the toe of her shoe in the soil. She could picture her father’s face, every detail as sharp as the last time she saw him. “My dad died last year. He was a high-school teacher.”

“Oh.” Tony touched her arm. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m a show jumper,” Angela said, changing the subject. “There’s a stable near my house. I’ve been riding there for years. I’m saving up to buy my own horse.”

“Have you won any trophies?”

“A few.” She smiled at the thought of her wall back home filled with row upon row of first and second place ribbons.

Suddenly, a movement near the house caught her attention as sunlight glinted off something metal. A figure, partially concealed by the late afternoon shadows, slid out of the back door of the house onto the brick patio. It was a young woman in a wheelchair. Her dark hair fell in a thick braid over her right shoulder, and she wore a pink floral skirt. Angela couldn’t help staring at her.

Just then, Giorgio and Barazza emerged from the house. Angela watched them walk over to the truck, but when she glanced back, the girl in the wheelchair was gone.

She looked over at Tony. He seemed so confident, so much more self-assured than the boys she knew back home.

“I’d better go,” she said, and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Tony said, placing his hand on her arm. “How long are you staying?”

“I’m here for a few more weeks. Then I go back for my last school year,” she answered, aware that his hand still lingered on her arm. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Angela! Come!” Giorgio waved at her. She smiled at Tony, then turned and walked toward the truck, her skin tingling from his touch.

“Well, what do you think of my horses?” Barazza asked as Angela walked up to the two men standing by the truck.

“They’re beautiful,” Angela answered.

“I see you’ve met Siena’s famous jockey,” Barazza said with a chuckle.

## Chapter Two

“Tony? Yes, we met.”

“Your uncle tells me you’re very good with horses,” Barazza said.

Angela nodded. “I’m a show jumper.”

“I could use some help around here, if you’re interested,” Barazza said.

“With the horses?” Angela brightened.

“I need someone to exercise them.” He tilted his head toward the house. “My daughter Catarina used to do that, before she had the accident. She can’t ride just yet. I’d be happy to pay you.”

Angela looked at her uncle, who smiled and nodded his approval. “Sure!” she said. “When can I start?”

“How about tomorrow?”

The next morning, Angela sat with a cup of coffee at one of the crowded sidewalk tables outside the small bakery her aunt and uncle owned. She felt relieved to escape the heat of the kitchen. *Even the air in Italy is different*, she thought. She was amazed at how a simple horse race could occupy the interest of a whole city, not just at the time of the race, but, according to Giorgio, for the whole year! Many of the shops and homes hung Palio pictures on their walls. There were Palio souvenirs on sale for the tourists, everything from scarves to pencils. All the shops were decorated with the colours of their neighbourhood *contrada*.

The bakery was alive with Palio chatter. She watched a group of round-faced men speaking animatedly, slamming