

TUSCAN ROSE

BELINDA ALEXANDRA

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

PROLOGUE

Florence, 1914

The man pauses in a doorway, swaying on his feet, before lunging again along the crooked street in the direction of the river. The distance he has covered across the city leaves him panting. But the fate of the infant he has hidden in the folds of his coat depends on him, and he is terrified that if he does not deliver her to safety, and return before his absence raises suspicion, they will both be lost.

The sound of hoofs on the cobblestones makes the hairs on his neck bristle. He twists to challenge his pursuer but sees only a merchant's carriage laden with candles and bags of flour. He leaps into a passageway between two houses. The breeze is chilly but the infant cradled against his chest warms his skin. He pushes back his coat and glimpses her face. 'God be praised for the deep sleep of babes,' the man mutters, caressing the child's cheek with his gloveless, calloused hand. He turns to the sky and tries to shut away the images of the last few hours, shivering when he remembers the bloodless face of the mother ... and the screams: so terrifying he could not have imagined they came from a human being.

He creeps along the street and comes upon a group of youths loitering around a fountain. One of them catches his eye and breaks away from the others: an emaciated adolescent with a moth-eaten scarf knotted at his throat. The man licks his lips and bares his teeth, but thinks better of the challenge and turns into a laneway. ‘*E allora!*’ the youth calls out after him but makes no move to follow. The boy may have only wanted a match for his cigarette, but Florence is on edge with the threat of war and this is not the time to take chances.

The man emerges from the laneway. The slow-moving Arno glitters before him in the setting sun. The Ponte Vecchio is golden in the rays. He remembers the first time he saw Florence and how he was sure that it was the most beautiful city in the world. But he was too naïve then to know that beauty has two faces and that a splendid façade can hide a putrid soul.

The man lopes along the bridge, ignoring the calls of the jewellers who are packing away their wares and hoping for a last-minute sale. He tracks along the banks of the Arno before his prematurely greying hair and bulky coat make him conspicuous amongst the young lovers on their evening strolls. He darts into a street of narrow houses before turning back onto Via Maggio and at last to the piazza that smells of coal fires and damp stone. A wind is swirling the leaves around the cobblestones. He stands before the high walls of the convent. Darkness is falling and he peers at the stones, hoping to see a *ruota*, a foundling wheel. There isn’t one. The convent in the town he grew up in had a *ruota*: a revolving door in the wall where a child could be deposited with the nuns without them seeing the bearer’s face. But the medieval practice has fallen out of favour in Italy’s current spirit of liberalism and he has no choice but to rap on the door. There is no response and he strikes the wood with more force.

Footsteps scurry inside and the grate is flung aside. He is aware of being looked at but it is too dark to see the

observer's face. The door scrapes open and he squints at the black-robed figure before him. He senses the nun's hesitation. It is not the custom of the sisters to welcome strange men in the night.

'I have a child,' he says.

He fears the nun will send him away. There is the Ospedale degli Innocenti for foundlings, but he knows it is overcrowded and the babies often die from poor hygiene. The infant's best chance is the convent. To his relief, the nun holds out a lamp over the steps and indicates for him to come inside. The man glances over his shoulder then follows her into the vestibule. The door thuds behind him, shutting out the encroaching night. The sound of singing drifts on the air: the sisters at vespers. The nun leads him to a parlour and turns on the light. She is young, no more than twenty, with a pleasant face. Her eyes pass over him and he sees the kindness in them. Suddenly all the strength it has taken him to steal the child to safety drains from him. Tears blur his vision.

'Come,' she says, directing him to a chair. His keen sense of smell detects the scents of rosemary and thyme on her sleeves. Does she work in the convent garden? Or the kitchen?

He unfolds his coat to reveal the child. She has woken up. Her fists are clenched into balls and her mouth is open in a silent cry.

The nun's eyes glisten when he passes the child into her arms. 'Shh! Shh!' the nun comforts her. 'You are hungry, aren't you, little one?'

The nun turns to him. 'The mother?' she asks delicately. 'Can she come to nurse her?'

'No,' the man answers, unable to hold the nun's gaze. He realises she has assumed the child is his and grimaces. He lost his family long ago. Will she think his wife has died in confinement? Or that she has left him? Or simply that they are too poor and sick to feed another mouth, like so many others in the city?

‘A wet nurse is staying here to feed a baby whose mother is ill,’ the nun says. ‘We won’t have to send this little one to a *balia*.’

The man has heard stories of the *balie*: women who take care of the abandoned infants for the convents and not always under hygienic conditions. It seems the child is doubly blessed and the man marvels at her turn in fate. He can see that the nun, beneath her robes, has a well-formed figure. She is the kind of woman, had she not been married to Christ, who would have made an excellent mother. The child is in good hands.

‘Will you visit her?’ the nun asks him.

The man shakes his head and the nun flinches. He watches her brush her finger over the child’s dusky-rose skin. She is a fine child, born to better things, he thinks. Now she will be poor. But better poor than ...

The nuns start singing again. The uplifting sound touches the man’s heart. He has achieved what he set out to do.

‘If you change your mind, you can come back. I’ll remember you,’ the nun says.

The man doesn’t answer her and for a while they are silent. Then he says: ‘It’s best that she remains anonymous. Without her birth name and history she will be safe.’

The nun pales. She has the right to demand the mother’s name but he sees that she has understood there is danger in saying anything more.

The man strides back to the vestibule. The nun follows him. He takes the handle and swings the door open, admitting a cold gust of wind. He turns for one last glimpse of the nun and the child. As he does so, he notices the only painting that adorns the white-washed wall behind them: the Madonna and the Christ child.

‘May they watch over you both,’ he says.

‘And over you,’ the nun replies.

The man nods before rushing out into the night.

The nun takes the child to the refectory, where a warm fire is burning. Placing the child on her lap, she feels her wrappings to see if they are wet. Something protrudes from the baby's thigh. The nun slips her hand into the wrappings and pulls out the object: a tiny silver key.

'It's magic,' the nun says under her breath. She told the stranger that she would remember him and she is certain that she will. With his watchful eyes and grizzled appearance ... he was a wolf in human form. But not the epitome of evil that the animal represented in legends. No, this wolf was kind — and badly in need of redemption.

Part One

ONE

Rosa Bellocchi was dying by inches. Her life was about to change and everything familiar was slipping from her grasp. She sat in the convent kitchen with Suor Maddalena as she had every morning since she had finished her formal education at the Convent of Santo Spirito. The kitchen was terracotta-tiled with a wooden bench running down the centre of it, and overlooked the courtyard and the statue of Sant'Agostino. Despite the fire in the cast-iron stove, the early spring air had a chill to it and the women had moved their chairs into the patch of sunlight streaming through the window. Suor Maddalena peeled potatoes while Rosa sat with her flute in her lap, her spine stiff and her stomach stretched taut. She pretended to study the phrasing of the hymn perched on her music stand but her mind was racing.

Will today be the last time we sit together like this? she asked herself.

Suor Maddalena sang when she worked in the kitchen. The convent was a place for meditation, but the cavernous halls and maze of corridors acted like echo chambers and each morning the duet of Suor Maddalena's perfect pitch and

the sweet tones of Rosa's flute would reach even the remotest parts of the convent. The nuns working in the vegetable garden lifted their heads and strained to hear the heavenly music, and the older ones, allowed to rest in their cells after breakfast, dreamed of angels. But that morning Suor Maddalena was silent, absorbed in a grief her faith would not allow her to show. Rosa's heart ached to think that she would soon be separated from the woman who was the closest person to a mother she had known. Their intimate relationship, the bond that had developed during their years in the kitchen, would cease and all future conversations would take place in the formal parlour through the grille with a 'listening nun' in attendance.

I will be on the outside of the only home I have known, Rosa thought.

Her eyes took in the words of the hymn — *The greatest joy is sacrificing one's self for others* — and she was reminded of her interview with the Badessa, the convent's Mother Superior, a few days before.

'Although the outside world thinks our life is plain, we are content,' the Badessa had told her. 'Our faith is full of wonder and our community shares an understanding lacking in many families. But to live this life one must be called to it ... and, Rosa, you have not been called.'

Rosa, whose blue-black eyes had been fixed on the painting of the Ascension on the wall behind the Badessa's desk, opened her mouth to speak but closed it again. She had tried to feel 'called' but had never heard the still voice that the nuns spoke of with rapture.

'I do feel called,' she told the Badessa, 'to something.'

The Badessa took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes before putting the glasses back on. 'With your intelligence and wit I have no doubt that God has a great purpose for you, Rosa. But it is not here within the walls of the convent. It is not with us that you will fulfil it.'

Rosa's heart beat violently. She had known this moment would come, but now it was here she was not prepared

for it. The older girls who had been schooled at the convent had been sent into marriages with good Florentine families. But that would not be possible for Rosa because she was an orphan.

‘I have spoken with Don Marzoli,’ the Badessa continued. ‘And our priest agrees that you would be a good governess and is making enquiries with our patron families to see if such a position is available. After all, you have excelled in mathematics and music and can speak English, French and German.’

‘I could teach here ... at the school,’ Rosa blurted out.

The sight of the Badessa’s raised eyebrows stopped her. It would be impossible to continue to live at the convent unless she were a nun. And she could not pretend she had been called, even though it meant she would be sent away.

‘When you become a nun you are still a mother and a bride, just in a different way,’ Suor Maddalena had once told her. ‘The day I was consecrated, my family was present and I wore a white veil.’ Some of the nuns had brothers and sisters who visited them in the parlour on festivals and special occasions, but their siblings’ lives were a world apart from the cloistered existence of the convent. Suor Maddalena had only been allowed to visit her family home once, when her mother was dying. Despite the Badessa’s assurances that the convent was a whole life, Rosa could not fathom giving away the good fortune of having been born into a family and having a proper name.

Suor Maddalena coughed, bringing Rosa’s thoughts from her interview with the Badessa back into the kitchen. Silent tears were falling down Suor Maddalena’s cheeks. The sight of them brought tears to Rosa’s own eyes.

‘Don Marzoli will find you a good position,’ Suor Maddalena said, half to Rosa and half to herself. ‘Not too far away. You can still come and see me.’

The tremble in the nun’s voice pinched Rosa’s heart. When she was a child, it had been Suor Maddalena who had soothed her nightmares and held her hand on the few

occasions the pair was allowed to leave the convent together. The Badessa often warned the nuns about forming too close an attachment to the orphans: 'They are like little birds that have been blown out of their nests in a storm. We feed them, keep them warm and educate them, but one day we must let them go.' Rosa knew that Suor Maddalena would be lonely when her 'little bird' had flown and she would not be able to show it. Rosa glanced at her hands and thought of her birth mother. She had no memory of her and imagined her to be a woman dressed in an azure robe with a beatific smile, like the painting of the Madonna holding the Christ child in the vestibule.

'What are you thinking?' Suor Maddalena asked. 'Why don't you play? It will make us both feel better.'

Rosa brought the flute to her lips but she couldn't produce any sound. She had a sudden desire to cling to anything she and Suor Maddalena had shared.

'Tell me again the story of how I came to the convent,' she said.

Suor Maddalena shredded sprigs of rosemary and did not answer.

'Please.'

When she was a child, Rosa had often pestered Suor Maddalena to tell her the story of the night the stranger had brought her to the convent. After each telling she would puzzle over who the man had been. Her father? A servant? But the mystery could not be solved and, when she grew up, Rosa had stopped asking.

'Tell me,' she begged Suor Maddalena now. 'I need to hear it one last time. Tell me about the Wolf.'

A few days later Suor Maddalena developed a fever and was ordered to stay in bed by the Badessa. Suor Dorotea and Suor Valeria took charge of supervising the cooking and their inane chatter sent Rosa fleeing to the chapel with her flute. Unlike with her piano practice, Rosa never had to discipline herself to play her second instrument. The pure

notes of the flute transported her to the heavenly realm as surely as the nuns' prayers delivered them to it. To skip practising was the same as going hungry: it left her tight in the stomach and moody.

Rosa was in the midst of Handel's Largo when she heard a car pull up in the courtyard. She glanced out the window expecting to see Don Marzoli's Fiat but instead caught sight of a black Bugatti coming to a stop near the statue. It was unprecedented for anyone except Don Marzoli or the doctor to bring a car into the convent and she wondered who had arrived to disturb the peace. She strained to see past the ilex tree and presently a chauffeur stepped out of the car and opened the rear door. First a man in a hat and with an overcoat hung on his arm appeared. He had a sportsman's physique and a tanned face. There was somebody else in the car behind him but Rosa's view was obscured by a branch moving in the breeze. All she glimpsed was a silver brocade sleeve and a white hand on the gentleman's arm.

A few minutes later, a novice nun hovered at the chapel door. 'The Badessa requires your presence immediately.'

Rosa swallowed and packed away her flute. It was her habit to take care with the task, careful not to press on the keys or force the pieces apart, because she knew how much the nuns had sacrificed to buy the instrument for her. But the thought that the man in the hat had come to claim her for employment made Rosa's hands shake. She dropped the headpiece, denting it. The damage to her most precious possession would normally have distressed her but she barely registered the accident.

Rosa followed the novice to the Badessa's office. Her bladder suddenly seemed full to the point of bursting. She excused herself to use the lavatory but when she sat down on the latrine she could not make herself pass water. If she tried longer she would test the Badessa's patience by keeping her waiting. She stood up and adjusted her stockings, with no sense of relief and a sharp pain jabbing her side.

The Badessa was sitting at her desk. The man Rosa had seen emerge from the Bugatti was there but not the woman. He was striking, with a square jaw and heavy eyebrows. He had a fresh complexion for his age, which Rosa guessed to be about forty, and would have appeared younger if not for the lines etched on his forehead and around his eyes. From the man's expensive silk suit and the gold signet ring on his finger, Rosa guessed he was someone of importance.

The Badessa spoke slowly as if to stress the significance of the occasion. 'Rosa, I introduce to you the Marchese Scarfiotti.'

A marchese? Rosa was taken aback by the noble title. She curtseyed.

'The Marchese Scarfiotti and his wife are looking for a governess for their daughter,' the Badessa explained. 'They are impressed by your accomplishments in music and your gift for languages.'

'My mother and grandmother both attended the school here and were fine musicians,' the Marchese said, crossing his legs and resting his elbow on his knee. 'Although my sister was schooled at home, she also took music lessons here as a child. Our family has always prided itself on our musical accomplishments. I want my daughter to carry on that tradition.'

'Perhaps you could play something for the Marchese now,' the Badessa said to Rosa.

Rosa clutched her flute case to her chest and squeezed her legs together. Her bladder was excruciatingly full. But she dutifully took out her flute and played the Handel piece she had been practising. Despite her discomfort, she played the piece better than she ever had before. When she finished she could see that the Marchese was pleased.

'The interpretation was sublime,' he said. 'Don Marzoli did not exaggerate your talents.' The Marchese's manner was almost fatherly and he had a pleasantly modulated voice.

'The Scarfiotti family are generous patrons of music and

art in Florence,' the Badessa said, looking steadily at Rosa. 'It is a great honour they have taken an interest in you.'

It was well known at the convent that Don Marzoli thought highly of Rosa, whom he considered advanced for her age. He must have gone to some lengths to find her a position with the Scarfiotti family. While Rosa was flattered she didn't want to leave so to whom she was sent was of little consequence.

The Badessa nodded to the novice nun and Rosa realised that she was being dismissed. Her fate had already been decided. The Marchese must have made up his mind before coming and had only wanted to hear her play out of curiosity.

Rosa returned to the chapel and knelt in a pew. She stared at the painting behind the altar of Christ on the Cross and felt like a condemned prisoner waiting for a stay of execution. Was it possible some miracle would occur, some change of policy, and she would be allowed to stay? Yet interest mingled with her despair. A marchese? Where did he live — in a castle or a villa? And why had his wife not accompanied him to the interview? Surely a mother would be keen to approve or disapprove of a governess for her daughter?

Rosa stood and went to the window. The Marchese's car was still in the courtyard. He must be completing the final details with the Badessa. Rosa opened her flute case and assembled the instrument, intending to play *Ave Maria*. The sound of the flute would soothe her, she thought, but when she placed the mouthpiece to her lips she found herself out of breath and unable to play, as she had a few days ago in the kitchen. Her thumb touched the dint in the headpiece and she sighed, longing to tell Suor Maddalena what had passed. She was panicked by the thought of being separated from her.

Rosa packed away her flute and hurried to Suor Maddalena's cell, but when she arrived she found it empty. Suor Eugenia was standing in the corridor.

'The doctor came this morning and ordered Suor Maddalena be moved to the convalescent room.'

‘The infirmary?’ cried Rosa, knowing only the most ill nuns were sent there. ‘I must see her.’

Suor Eugenia shook her head. ‘It’s forbidden for anyone to go near her. There is a danger of pneumonia.’

‘Pneumonia?’

‘Suor Maddalena has an infection in her chest and must not be upset in any way.’

The blood drained from Rosa’s face. What if she didn’t get to say goodbye to Suor Maddalena at all? She rushed to her own cell and gave a cry when she saw the novice nun packing her clothes into a small suitcase.

‘You are leaving this morning,’ the novice told her. ‘The Marchese is waiting for you in the courtyard. The Badessa said she will meet you there.’

‘But Suor Maddalena is sick. I can’t leave now.’

The novice touched Rosa’s arm. ‘Be brave,’ she said.

Rosa rushed to the desk and scribbled a note for Suor Maddalena before taking her suitcase from the novice and running out to the courtyard. The Badessa was standing by the car with the Marchese. He seemed impatient to be on his way. Rosa had known for several days now that she would be leaving the convent, but everything was happening too fast.

‘Please, Reverenda Madre,’ she said, ‘would you give this letter to Suor Maddalena? I’ve had no time to say goodbye to her or anyone else. I will come and see her as soon as she is better.’

The Badessa averted her eyes. ‘Suor Maddalena will be pleased that you have obtained such a prestigious position. She made sure you received the best education possible.’

Rosa’s heart fell with the Badessa’s words. Was it possible that Suor Maddalena was not as sick as Suor Eugenia had claimed? Was she purposely being kept from Rosa’s departure? Rosa wanted to ask if she might speak to Suor Maddalena through the infirmary window but the Marchese handed his hat and overcoat to the chauffeur and the Badessa nudged her towards the car.

‘Don’t keep your new employer waiting,’ she whispered. ‘Behave well and work hard, Rosa. That is the finest gratitude you can show Suor Maddalena.’

The chauffeur, a small, middle-aged man, took Rosa’s bag from her but the latch was not properly secured and her clothes and books spilled out.

‘I beg your pardon, signorina,’ said the chauffeur, bending to retrieve the fallen items. He picked up a dress and something fell out of the pocket. It was a folded piece of paper. Rosa scooped it up before anyone saw it, and slipped it into her sleeve cuff, wondering if it was a note from Suor Maddalena.

The chauffeur opened the door for Rosa and she climbed inside. The car smelled of jasmine. She gave a start when she saw the woman in the brocade coat sitting there already. The woman was pretty, with creamy skin and strawberry-blonde curls poking out from her hat. She stared at Rosa then smiled.

‘Here,’ she said, spreading the ermine wrap she held on her knees so that it covered Rosa’s legs as well.

Rosa cringed but resisted the urge to shove the wrap off herself. The touch of fur when it was lifeless repulsed her. She only liked it when it was warm and on a living animal. She saw the origin of things when others saw only the object. A fox stole slung over the shoulder of a woman in the convent’s parlour had once sent her heart racing with fear, as if she were the hunted animal running for its life through the woods. The leather-bound Bible in the chapel nauseated her whenever Don Marzoli opened it: she pictured the leather worker scraping off animal tissue while others saw only the Word of God.

The Marchese seated himself next to the woman and Rosa pushed herself into the corner to give him room. ‘This is Signora Corvetto,’ he said. ‘She is accompanying me today.’ He gave no further explanation.

So the woman wasn’t the Marchesa. Then who was she? Her clothes were elegant and she had pearls layered around

her neck and emerald rings on her fingers. Could she be the Marchese's secretary?

The car started to move and Rosa waved goodbye to the Badessa. She was surprised when the old nun, who had always been formal with her, blew her a kiss. The spectacle of the Badessa against the backdrop of the only world Rosa had known brought tears to her eyes.

'So you have lived in a convent all your life?' Signora Corvetto asked her.

'Yes, signora.'

Signora Corvetto lit a cigarette and looked through the smoke at Rosa. 'You are a fine musician, I've heard. Clementina loves music.'

Signora Corvetto gave the impression that she was going to ask something else but changed her mind. Her blue eyes were sad. The Marchese slipped his hand into Signora Corvetto's. Rosa shifted in her seat and glanced back at the convent, which was disappearing into the distance. She might have lived a sheltered life but she was beginning to suspect that Signora Corvetto was not the Marchese's secretary.

The chauffeur took them along the Arno to the Ponte Santa Trinita, which was the furthest Rosa could remember travelling from the convent. The other side of the river was a Florence that she had seen only in the distance and now she was in the middle of it. She temporarily forgot her heartache and looked at the narrow streets, gloomy because of the shadows cast by the houses. Some of them were no more than alleys and passageways. The chauffeur had to manoeuvre with care through the main streets to avoid colliding with trams, bread carts and maids carrying baskets of vegetables on their heads. Every so often the sun burst upon the car when they passed a piazza. Rosa could not believe the riches displayed by the vendors whose stores bordered the open spaces: the antiques dealers and framers; the perfumers with ribbed glass bottles and gold filigree hand mirrors in their

windows; the boxes stacked with asparagus, carrots, artichokes and beets in the doorways of the grocers'. Never before had Rosa seen such abundance. The convent prided itself on simplicity and self-sufficiency. The nuns pressed their own oils and wove their own cloth. Life there had always been frugal.

The Marchese slipped his hand into his pocket, took out a silver cigarette case and leaned across Signora Corvetto.

'Do you care to smoke?' he asked Rosa.

Rosa was taken aback by his sudden familiarity. She shook her head.

'There is the Duomo,' he said, pointing out the window. 'I doubt you've seen it this close before, Signorina Bellocchi? Some of Italy's greatest talents have worked on this grand monument: Giotto, Orcagna, Gaddi.'

Rosa turned to where he was indicating and saw the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, known by the Florentines as the Duomo. It towered over the other buildings and she was dazzled by the walls tiled in pink and green marquetry and Brunelleschi's famous red dome. She had only ever seen the church in a black-and-white picture.

'The white tiles are from Carrara, the green from Prato and the red from Siena,' the Marchese told her, pushing back his hair. 'Some think it is excessive, but you can see that there is harmony between the cathedral, belltower and baptistry.'

The Marchese's face became flushed as he described the difficulties the various artists had encountered at each stage of the construction process and how Brunelleschi was once removed by ushers after a disagreement with the building committee. When the Marchese spoke about the artistic merits and the history of the building he became a different person: less restrained. Rosa found herself warming to him.

The chauffeur brought the car to a stop and opened the door for the Marchese and Signora Corvetto to alight. He gave no indication that Rosa should follow. The Marchese turned and dipped his head into the car.

‘Giuseppe will take you on to the villa,’ he said, nodding towards the chauffeur. ‘I trust you will be happy in your position.’

Before Rosa had a chance to absorb what was happening, the chauffeur shut the door, returned to his seat and reversed the car. Rosa looked through the rear window to see the Marchese and Signora Corvetto strolling across the piazza, heads close together in conversation. She didn’t know what to make of the situation.

‘Are you comfortable there, Signorina Bellocchi?’ Giuseppe asked.

‘Yes, thank you.’

Rosa would have liked to ask the chauffeur about the Scarfiotti family, because she had been told so little, but she was overcome by shyness and remained quiet. Giuseppe turned his attention back to driving. Rosa took out the piece of paper she had hidden in her sleeve. She unfolded it and discovered inside a tiny silver key with a heart-shaped bow on the end of it. She checked to see if Suor Maddalena had written an explanation on the paper, but there was nothing. Rosa held the key in the palm of her hand, imagining what it might open. It was too light for a door or a wardrobe. Perhaps it fitted into the lock of a small case? She rewrapped the key and tucked it back into her sleeve.

A while later, the car passed a sign that read: *To Fiesole*.

‘Ah, the English,’ said Giuseppe, pointing to a gathering of women with irises in their arms outside a cemetery. Their blonde hair, lace dresses and sensible shoes reminded Rosa of her English-language tutor at the convent, Mrs Richards, who had helped the students with pronunciation when the nuns could not.

‘The English are everywhere on Via Tornabuoni,’ said Giuseppe. ‘You will see. It’s like being in London.’

I will see, thought Rosa. There was no doubt that her old life was diminishing and a new one was opening up before her. Despite her apprehension, she began to feel a tingle of excitement.

The car sped uphill and magnificent villas came into sight alongside the road, each one more elaborate than the last. Rosa noticed a sprawling villa with *pietra serena* columns and a loggia overlooking a garden of magnolia and olive trees, and then another with an ornate tower and windows with stone surrounds and corbels. Was this how the Scarfiotti family lived, she wondered. They passed some more villas and then some fields, and Rosa glimpsed the view of Florence below.

Giuseppe glanced over his shoulder. 'Would you like to see it?' he asked.

Rosa told him that she would and he pulled the car to the side of the road and opened the door for her. A breeze tickled the grass around her knees as she inched her way towards the slope. Florence in all its magnificence stretched out before her. The clusters of red-roofed buildings, churches and convents huddled together with the Basilica and Brunelleschi's dome towering above them all. Although she could not see the convent she could hear the bells of the city's churches ringing and she knew the nuns would be going to their prayers. It was hard to believe that she had been playing her flute in the convent's chapel only a few hours ago. Tears pricked her eyes when she realised that she would never play there again.

'You will miss the nuns, yes?' asked Giuseppe, looking at her sympathetically.

'Yes,' she replied.

He nodded but said nothing more. Rosa found it odd that he didn't try to reassure her by telling her how pleasant life would be with the Scarfiotti family.

They returned to the car and, a short while later, entered a road bordered on either side by stone walls. Rosa stretched her neck to see trees or other features of the landscape over the walls but could glimpse nothing. She felt as if the car was barreling down a tunnel. The sensation lasted until they came to a wrought-iron gate with stone mastiffs either side of it and a gatehouse set back from the fence and

surrounded by a tall hedge. Giuseppe sounded the horn. The door to the gatehouse opened and an unshaven man with shoulder-length grey hair and wearing a shirt and vest peered out. He headed towards the gates and fixed his large hands on the lock to open them so Giuseppe could drive through. Despite the man's rumpled appearance, his posture was strong and erect. Giuseppe eased the car forward. Rosa looked at the gatekeeper, intrigued by his air of dignity, but he kept his eyes averted.

The drive to the villa was through a wood. Suddenly the trees gave way and the Villa Scarfiotti came into view. The house was four storeys high, with the central section set back from the wings. From each floor eight windows looked out over the lawns. The railings and trimmings were covered with verdigris, and the bluish-green patina was repeated on the fountain at the centre of the driveway and the pillars and ornamental urns that bordered the steps leading to the imposing bronze doors. Dozens of classical statues dotted the lawns: maidens with urns and men with swords. Each statue seemed frozen in its activity, as if it had once been a real person whom an enchantress had turned to stone. There were no lemon trees in terracotta pots or flowerbeds bursting with zinnias and white stocks such as Rosa had seen on the terraces of the villas lining the road. The garden of the Villa Scarfiotti was a sudden cutting away of the woods with only box hedges and oleanders to soften it. The other villas Rosa had passed had been graceful, smaller in scale and in harmony with the surrounding countryside. The Villa Scarfiotti was imposing, as if the original designer had intended to make those who approached it feel daunted rather than welcomed.

Giuseppe brought the car to a stop, took out Rosa's flute case and bag and opened the door for her. Rosa heard the locks on the twelve-foot-high doors open and waited on the stone steps with Giuseppe, bracing herself to meet the Marchesa. But it was not a noblewoman who appeared before them but a housekeeper in a black uniform.

‘Where’s the Marchese?’ the housekeeper asked Giuseppe, a scowl on her face.

‘He is still in the city.’

The woman’s fierce eyes fixed on Giuseppe. She had blonde-grey hair pulled severely back from her face and skin like crepe paper. ‘Who is this?’ she asked him, indicating Rosa.

‘The new governess.’

The wrinkles around the housekeeper’s mouth twitched. ‘What’s she doing here? The Marchesa won’t be back until tomorrow. They are still in Venice.’

Rosa’s feelings of anticipation at seeing the Villa Scarfiotti faded with the housekeeper’s sharpness. She wondered if Don Marzoli and the Badessa had any idea of the chaotic arrangements of the Scarfiotti household. Then a troubling thought occurred to her: now she was out of the convent, Don Marzoli and the Badessa were no longer responsible for her welfare. She was on her own.

‘The Marchese thought it would be more convenient if Signorina Bellocchi came here today,’ Giuseppe told the woman. ‘To settle in.’

A shrewish look passed over the housekeeper’s face at the mention of Rosa’s name. It meant ‘beautiful eyes’ and the nuns had chosen it for Rosa because she had no parents to give her their own surname. Even though Innocenti and Nocentini were the names usually given to foundlings, Rosa could tell the curious name had aroused the housekeeper’s suspicions and she cringed inwardly. The suggestion that she was an orphan, or, even worse, illegitimate, would only make the woman despise her more. Rosa recalled that the Marchese had told her she would report directly to him and she felt grateful that her position was not overseen by the housekeeper.

‘Convenient for whom?’ the woman replied to Giuseppe. ‘No one has told me which room to give her.’

‘Put her in the nursemaid’s room,’ he suggested.

Giuseppe spoke calmly but the twinkle in his eye made Rosa think he enjoyed baiting the woman.

‘That’s on the fourth floor,’ said the housekeeper with emphasis. ‘I won’t do that without the Marchesa’s instructions. She can sleep in the scullery maid’s room until I’m told otherwise.’

Giuseppe glanced at Rosa and shrugged.

‘Come then,’ the housekeeper said to Rosa, jerking her head towards the door. ‘You will have to make up your own room. I am the only one here today. You are not above that, I hope, Signorina *Bellocchi*.’

Rosa followed the housekeeper dutifully. She was used to the contempt people showed towards orphans, and had suffered taunts from the paying students at the convent, especially when the teaching nuns refused to put her at the back of the classroom where they and their parents thought foundlings belonged. ‘You are by far the brightest pupil,’ Suor Maddalena had explained to her. ‘Suor Camilla and Suor Grazia want the others to follow your example, not the other way around.’

Rosa forgot the housekeeper’s hostility the moment she entered the house. The villa’s exterior was Renaissance in style with some Baroque additions, but the interior was ultra-modern and glittering. Flashes of light dazzled her eyes. The floor of the entrance hall was white marble and extended to a sweeping staircase. The walls were amethyst purple with wall lights of rock crystals illuminated from within. There were mirrors of every shape, size and description: square mirrors with pearl-veneered frames; round ones with silver filigree trimmings; and dozens of oval ones that were shaped like eyes. Rosa cried out when she caught her reflection in a grand gilded mirror: she had never seen herself so clearly before. Mirrors were forbidden at the convent as symbols of vanity, and she had only glimpsed shadowy images of herself in window glass or in the rippled pool of the fountain. She was taken aback by her coal-black hair and oblong face, and her startled eyes. She was taller than the housekeeper and much longer-limbed. They looked like a deer and a hedgehog standing together.

‘Shh! Do you have to make such a noise?’ the housekeeper scolded her. The woman’s scowl transformed into a snigger. ‘Where do you come from? Haven’t you seen such fine things before?’

Rosa was too overcome by the sight of herself to answer.

‘Bellocchi. Is that your real name?’ the housekeeper persisted.

Rosa recovered herself and saw where the conversation was headed. The sight of her reflection had not only startled her but had awakened her too. She peered at herself again. No, on second glance she did not look like an innocent deer at all. That was only how she felt on the inside. Her outer appearance suggested the contrary. Although her dark eyes were large with long lashes, the blueness in them was savage. Her limbs were long and she was muscly with sloping shoulders, like a panther.

‘Yes,’ she answered. ‘Bellocchi is my family name.’

The housekeeper stiffened. ‘Bellocchi is my family name, *Signora Guerrini*.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You must call me *Signora Guerrini*. Or didn’t they teach you manners wherever you came from?’ The housekeeper sniffed before fixing her eyes on the flute case Rosa held in her hand along with her bag. ‘And don’t think that you will be able to play that here. The Marchesa is sensitive to any kind of noise.’

Some of the older nuns at the convent had been crotchety and the Badessa had been stern, but Rosa had never before encountered anyone with such a bad temper as *Signora Guerrini*. No, the housekeeper’s not a cute hedgehog either, she thought. She’s quite something else.

Rosa followed *Signora Guerrini* to the grand staircase and then beyond it to a door. When the housekeeper opened it, Rosa saw a stairwell leading to the cellar. Was that where the scullery maid slept? Her skin prickled when *Signora Guerrini* led her down the stairs and into a dungeon-like space. The chilly stone floor bit through the soles of her shoes. Through

the curtains of spider webs she could see hundreds of dusty bottles on the wrought-iron racks. Signora Guerrini reached a door that led to a corridor, which then opened into an enclave with a bed and a set of drawers. To Rosa's relief the space was pleasant. The lemon-blossom-patterned wallpaper was bordered by a strip of sunflowers that matched the cover on the iron bed. The golden theme continued to the ceiling where it culminated in a star-shaped ceiling rose. The wallpaper disguised an inbuilt cupboard, which Signora Guerrini opened and indicated for Rosa to place her bag and flute on the shelf inside. She pulled a set of sheets from the cupboard and tossed them on the bed.

'You can make it up yourself,' she said. 'I have things to do and you weren't expected.'

'Thank you, Signora Guerrini,' Rosa said, noticing the charcoal bedwarmer the housekeeper took from the cupboard and placed under the bed. Perhaps she did not despise Rosa as much as Rosa thought. 'The room is very pleasant.'

Signora Guerrini pulled aside a curtain to reveal a view of the kitchen garden. 'Yes, they made it so, didn't they?' she said, a malicious grin forming on her face. 'It used to be the hospital room. They brought servants here when they caught the plague. The scullery maid won't stay here. She says it's haunted.'

Signora Guerrini left Rosa alone to unpack her things, which were so few that the task was completed within minutes. She tucked in the sheets and then sat on the bed, thinking over the day that had passed. That morning she had awoken in her cell at the convent, and now she was here in this room, which, while much prettier, put her ill at ease.

Behind a screen she found a sink and a bucket with a wooden seat. She turned on the tap. The water was freezing and smelled of slime. She let it run then rinsed her mouth and splashed her face before returning to sit on the bed. She longed to play her flute to quiet her mind but did not wish to arouse any further ill will in Signora Guerrini.

She held an imaginary flute to her lips and lost herself in playing Bach's Allemande and other pieces from memory.

The afternoon passed by this way and evening fell. Rosa waited for Signora Guerrini to return to call her to dinner or to show her around, but once the moon rose and the room turned cold she understood that this would not happen. She took the warmer from under the bed and held it in her lap. Without coals from a fire it was useless. She remembered the charcoal warmer that Suor Maddalena had given her in winter when she was a child. The gentle heat that emanated from it had filled her with happiness.

She took out the key from her sleeve and tucked it into her flute case. A shiver passed down her spine and she undressed with the light still burning. It was not so much the thought of ghosts that made her afraid but the rats she could hear scratching in the cellar. She knelt by her bed to pray but the words she had said before bedtime all her life, which had touched her with comfort and peace, felt empty and hollow. Climbing into bed, Rosa wondered if her inability to pray was because she had been so abruptly separated from Suor Maddalena, or if it was because she was now somewhere that God couldn't hear her.