

The Madonna of Pisano

Book One of The Italian Chronicles Trilogy

A Novel
by
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Prologue

Pisano, Sicily, April 1885

“Carlo, vieni subito. Come quickly.” Maria Landro flashed a brilliant smile at the handsome young man admiring her from only a few yards away. In an instant, he was at her side. She pointed to the litter of newly born puppies. “Look! There are six of them. And they are so beautiful.” Maria gazed into the large box at their feet. Nestled in a corner was a lovely female cocker spaniel surrounded by six suckling newborn puppies.

Carlo put his arms around her. “Someday we’ll have six of our own.” His lips brushing against her ear sent chills down her spine.

She turned toward him and laughed. “Puppies?”

“No, Silly.” He took her by the shoulders and turned her toward him. “Beautiful children.” He planted a soft kiss on her lips. “Just like you.”

How Maria longed for that day! She and Carlo had grown up together, gone to the village school together, and worked together in the fields. Their families had been close and, from their children's earliest years, had assumed that one day they would marry. That assumption turned into conviction as naturally as caterpillars turn into butterflies. By the time Maria was fifteen, she knew without a doubt she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Carlo Mancini. When she turned seventeen, they were formally engaged. “Will you still think I'm beautiful after we've been married for fifty years?”

He brushed the dark strands back from her forehead. “Each day you will become more beautiful to me than the day before.”

She looked deep into his eyes and returned the kiss. Their wedding was only a few months away. While Carlo continued to work hard in the fields, she’d taken a job as assistant housekeeper at the rectory of her parish church, the Church of the Holy Virgin. There she'd been baptized. There she'd been educated, and there she would soon be married.

Maria’s gaze drifted past Carlo to the roughening waters of the emerald blue Mediterranean sea just beyond Bella Terra, her family's hillside farm. She’d learned to sense the water's every nuance, every tremor, every slightest change. Today, the Mediterranean seemed tenser than usual.

Her stomach responded in kind.

“Maria!” Mama called from the large, two-story stucco house behind them, the house that had belonged to her family for four generations. “*Frappoco si mangia*. We’ll be eating soon.”

Taking Carlo’s hand, Maria gave a flirtatious toss of her long black hair and led him back across the courtyard, past the purple-rose clusters of bougainvillea, toward the house. “I can’t wait until we’re married.” She smiled and gave him a sidelong glance.

“Neither can I.” Carlo kissed her again. “Neither can I.”

Mama and Maria’s younger sisters, Luciana and Cristina, were already seated at the long, oaken table when Maria entered with Carlo. The aroma of garlic filled the air of the rustic Sicilian kitchen. “Oh, Mama. It smells so good.”

Mama smiled. “Your favorite, Maria. Linguine with artichokes.”

“When are you going to make my favorite?” ten-year-old Luciana whined.

Cristina, four years her senior, nudged her younger sister. “Stop complaining. Mama made your favorite last Sunday, don’t you remember?”

Luciana scrunched her face into a question mark.

Mama laughed. “Cristina is right, dear daughter of mine. I made angel hair pasta *alla marinara* for you on Sunday.”

Luciana's face registered remorse. “Sorry, Mama. I forgot.”

Mama blew Luciana a kiss. “I forgive you.”

Maria took her usual place at the table. Carlo sat in the empty chair beside her. How good it was to be surrounded by her wonderful family! Soon she would be leaving them to set up her own household and to start her own family with the man she loved. Her life with Carlo would be just as filled with love and laughter as her life at home had been. She would see to it.

If only Papa had lived long enough to walk her down the aisle. His sudden death a year before had rocked her to her core. Thankfully, he'd left Mama and the children with a prosperous family business that would provide for them as long as they continued to build it.

She glanced at Carlo as Mama folded her hands. “Let’s pray.”

Maria bowed her head with the others as Mama intoned the same prayer of thanksgiving Papa used to pray over every meal ever since Maria could remember. “O God of Heaven and Earth, bless this food that You have provided. Bless us who eat it so that we may continue to serve You in obedience and in health. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

The clatter of dishes being passed to Mama for filling was like the happy refrain of a well-known song. Maria’s heart sang as Mama placed generous portions of pasta on each plate and then handed it to its rightful owner for the pleasant task of eating its delicious contents. Maria smiled. If happiness had a pinnacle, then she had surely reached it.

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The daily trudge from Bella Terra to the rectory took about twenty minutes on a good day. But the stormy weather this Monday morning made Maria's walk more difficult than usual. She clutched her satchel closer to her cloak and straightened her umbrella. Rosa would be waiting for her with their morning coffee, the way the elderly head housekeeper waited every morning of the work week. Maria had grown fond of the dear woman and their heart-to-heart talks. Rosa was like a second mother to her, and Maria was the daughter Rosa never had.

Maria drew in a deep breath of the cool morning air. The same air she'd breathed ever since her birth seventeen years earlier. Soon, she'd celebrate her eighteenth birthday and,

shortly after that, her wedding day.

Her heart surged with longing for Carlo. A longing pure and virginal on both of their parts. After the wedding, Carlo would work at Bella Terra as head foreman, overseeing the planting and the harvesting. A very important job, and one he would handle well.

She smiled. Carlo handled everything well. She loved that about him. It made her feel secure and safe. The way Papa had made her feel before he died.

She rounded the last bend in the road before reaching the village. Already vendors were setting up their wares. The smell of fresh squid and mussels from the nearby sea filled the air.

“Pesce fresco. Fresh fish. Squid, mussels, clams. Whatever your heart desires.” Angelo, the fish vendor, smiled at her as she passed. “Buon giorno, Maria.”

“Good morning to you, too, Angelo.” She laughed. “Despite this rainy mess.”

One by one, she greeted the vendors, most of whom sold produce grown on her family's farm. Thanks to their business, Bella Terra was thriving. She smiled and waved at each vendor as she passed by.

By the time she reached the rectory, the wind had grown stronger. Closing her umbrella, she left it on the back doorstep and entered the two-story gray stucco house that served as the rectory for the Church of the Virgin. “Rosa, I'm here.”

But instead of the older woman's usual greeting, Maria found herself face to face with Don Franco Malbone, her former teacher and the head parish priest. “Oh, good morning, Padre. You startled me. I was expecting Rosa.” She tried to quiet the uneasy feeling she had every time she was around him.

“Rosa will not be here today. She is not feeling well.”

An alarm went off in Maria's soul. “I'm sorry to hear that. I will bring her some homemade soup later today.”

“That is very kind of you.” He stood there and did not move, a strange look on his face.

Maria removed her shawl and laid it on a bench in the kitchen. “Are you and Don Vincenzo ready for breakfast?”

“I already had breakfast. Don Vincenzo left early to go to Palermo on church business. It is only you and I today, Maria.”

The tone of his voice chilled her.

“Well then, I'll be sure not to disturb you, Padre. I will go about my duties and then leave quietly.”

“Very well. If you need me, I'll be in my office.”

She nodded. While still a student under his tutelage, she'd vowed she would never need Don Franco for anything. Not after the way he'd leer at her in a way that made her feel extremely uncomfortable.

But when Don Franco had offered her a job as assistant housekeeper at the rectory, she'd decided to take it to save money for her marriage to Carlo. Although Papa had left her family solvent, she refused to take any of her family's resources to set up her own home. Mama and her sisters would need the inheritance for their own future.

Maria nodded. Uneasy, she watched as he walked away.

When he was out of sight, she turned her attention toward making coffee. Since Rosa had not come to work today, there was no hot coffee awaiting her as usual. Maria filled the little espresso pot with water and then added the dark coffee grounds. She'd miss having coffee with Rosa this morning. Their daily chats about life were the highlight of Maria's day.

While the coffee brewed, she swept the kitchen floor and chopped vegetables for Don Franco's lunch. When the espresso pot began to steam, she removed it from the wood-burning stove and placed it on a brown ceramic tile on the table. She then added four teaspoons of sugar to the pot and let it sit while she took a demitasse cup from the cupboard. She then returned to the coffee pot and poured herself some coffee. The aroma of fresh espresso wafting through the air was enough to energize her.

“The coffee smells good.”

She startled and turned abruptly as Don Franco approached her from behind.

“Would you like a cup, Padre?” Despite her best effort, she could not hide the quiver in her voice.

“Yes, thank you.”

Her stomach squeezed at the way he looked at her. It was not a priestly look. Keeping her eyes lowered, she filled a small cup for him, hoping he did not notice her trembling hands.

“I will be spending the entire morning in my office and do not wish to be disturbed. If anyone comes, please say I am busy. Unless, of course, it is an emergency.”

She nodded. “Yes, Padre.”

Relief flooded her soul when he left the room again. Although she'd been working at the rectory for three months, she'd never grown accustomed to Don Franco's strange ways, nor his strange looks. He'd suddenly appear without warning, or he'd linger when it was inappropriate to linger.

On one occasion, she'd spoken of her discomfort to Carlo.

“You're just imagining things, Maria. He's a priest for heaven's sake! What harm could he do? He was probably encouraging you in your new job. There's nothing to worry about.” But Maria wasn't so sure.

THE MADONNA OF PISANO

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