

PART ONE

{ I } Italy, 1924

INDEED, SALVATORE ROSSELLI'S life had been lived in a dreadful bondage, beginning on a summer day in southern Italy, 1924, when the wind rose up with the smell of the sea in it. Salvatore knew then that a misfortune was coming: the smell of the sea had never been a good sign in Cerignola. He'd heard Dona Melo talking about that more than once as she sat on a stool in her doorway. He knew the *mezzardi* were coming soon; they would help with the harvesting of the grapes, and he wondered if they were bringing the misfortune with them.

The smell of the sea did not last long, and behind it came the familiar scents of the limestone fields, the grass, the olive trees, and the goats that Salvatore was herding out of their small corral. One of the females put her head into his hand, and he rubbed the delicately-shaped skull and looked back into the expressive eyes. He felt as if he could almost read her thoughts. A sharp whistle came from his father, and Salvatore closed the gate and went quickly over to him. His father's huge hands danced in the air, instructing him to take the goats out to graze. A short time later he held an olive branch in one hand, which he used to discourage strays, and in the other he carried a sack of tomatoes, dry bread, and some goat's cheese.

The sun was midway over the Gargano massif, the large hill that comprised the horizon to the north, and beat down upon the treeless plain of the Capitanata stretching across Italy from the Appenine mountain range to the Adriatic sea. Salvatore herded the goats off the dusty road with much use of his prodding stick and much gentle shoving

into a field of coarse stubble. The goats immediately began to graze in the sun. Salvatore settled himself on the shady grass beneath an olive tree and began his midday meal.

The land was quiet without the tinkling of the goat bells, except for the chattering of insects; the heat rose off the arid fields, making the horizon wavy. Salvatore selected a fat, ripe tomato. Biting into it, he sucked out the juice, then sprinkled on some salt from the goat-skin bag tied with leather tongs to the rope around his waist. He ate two tomatoes with a hunk of bread and dry cheese and lay back on the smooth grass with his head on his arms, looking up at the sky.

The sky was so blue through the branches of the olive tree that it hurt his eyes. Soon he was asleep. He made a handsome sight: the black-haired, lean, golden brown youth of sixteen stretched out in a field beneath a solitary olive tree with a herd of goats grazing around him. In fact, he looked like Paris about to be visited by the three goddesses.

When Salvatore awoke, he thought it was raining. He wiped the wet spots from his face, gave the goats a glance, and closed his eyes again. A snigger came from the tree above him, and he looked up in time to catch the well-aimed spit in his eyes. He leapt up, cursing, wiping the spit from his eyes with the fingers of both hands. The voice from the tree laughed derisively, chorused by another cruel scoff from somewhere on the ground. His eyes still blurred, Salvatore held up his fists, but they were useless against the vicious pelting of olives which answered his blind aggression. He crouched down, hands protecting his face. The small hard olives stung his flesh. When the barrage stopped, Salvatore re clenched his fists, stood up, and swung around.

A swarthy, dark-haired young man stood on either side of the tree, and both were laughing like hyenas.

"Hey, shit-face," sneered the shorter of the two, "what the hell do you think you're doin' with those goats on our land?" He spoke rapidly in the dialect of Apulia, the words blunted and strung crudely together.

"This is my father's land!" Salvatore cried savagely. "All the land on this side of the wall!"

"What wall?" the older boy taunted. "I don't see no wall."

Salvatore looked to the field edge where he and his father had sweated and grunted as they piled stone upon stone to make a wall to fit the boundary of their farm. Their wall was now a pile of rubble.

"Bastard!" Salvatore screamed as he charged the older boy. He was on top as they hit the ground but was unable to strike a solid blow before the younger brother attacked him from behind, dragged him off, and held him while his brother head-butted him in the stomach.

Salvatore was nearly unconscious when they dropped him to the ground, kicking him in the back for good measure.

"Don't you ever come back here, shit-face," the smaller one spat out. "This is our land, all our land to the swamp. And you better tell your dumb father that our papa is real mad at him for buildin' that wall. Next time it won't be just the wall we break."

They threw a few more olives and ran whooping through the herd of grazing goats, scattering the frightened animals in every direction.

Salvatore lay upon the ground face upwards and bleeding. As he regained full consciousness, he became aware of a stabbing pain in his back. He hurt all over but there the pain was sharply focused. He turned over on his stomach and the pain became a bit duller but not by much. He closed his eyes. The smell of the earth filled his nostrils: limestone mixed with sandy soil. His mind was going dark. At length the sound of the goat bells fingered through the darkness and roused him to action. He tried to move his bruised body but his limbs were heavy and the effort to lift them and stand up were excruciating. Biting back the pain, he finally stood up and staggered towards the regrouped herd of goats. The pain cut around his loins and across his abdomen like a whiplash, and he doubled over, hugging himself. At last he was able to stand and walk again, taking deep breaths to blunt the lashing of the pain.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Salvatore was limping along the road toward home. The goats trotted in front of him, and it was difficult to keep up behind the cloud of dust raised by their hoofs. His mouth was as parched as the road he stumbled along. "If only someone would come along with a wagon," he thought. He knew there would soon be a *trulli* where he could stop to drink some water and rest. His mind spun in delirium, and the road seemed to rise up into the sun.

The young men who had beaten him were his cousins, the sons of Pietro Rosselli, his father's half-brother. The dispute was over the few acres of fertile land which his father, Dominic Rosselli, owned and farmed. Fertile land was scarce in Cerignola, and the Rosselli's fields were among the few that were not covered entirely by limestone, marshes, or the porous, floury soil of the Tavoliere. This portion of Italy, the small province of Foggia, was like a tough old man plagued by a thousand minor illness but without one mortal enough to put him out of his misery. Salvatore and his father and the people of Foggia, hard-working peasants, were made of the same resilience.

The province of Foggia was contained within Apulia, and it was the most forgotten part of the land that time forgot. Regione d'Apulia was, in fact, the Achilles heel of all Italy. It had first been part of Magna Graecia, and later, traversed by the Via Appia, it became the springboard for Roman penetration into the Balkans. Then for centuries it was an outpost of the Byzantine Empire but was harried by Saracen pirates and menaced by Turks. Apulia was as ill-used by nature as by man. The three major geographical divisions, the Gargano Peninsula, the Murge, and the Tavoliere, are enclosed to the west by the southern range of the Apennine mountains and to the east by the Adriatic Sea and completely surrounded by a fringe of hills. All three divisions have minor variations of grazing land and crop land, but the major theme running through all is the limestone tableland, arid and unyielding. In the Middle Ages, the Tavoliere became the preserve of powerful pastoral families. These

farming families were soon decimated by the malaria from the lagoons and marshes. Still, strategically located Apulia was the wildebeest fought over by the lions of the Roman and Byzantine Empires. For this reason, the coastal towns were unsafe and most of the population became concentrated in the large agricultural settlements of San Severo, Cerignola, Lucera, and the town of Foggia. Despite their exposure to volcanoes, malaria, poor soil and dry summers, the tenacious farmers nursed meager crops of wheat, oats, tomatoes, almonds, grapes, and olives out of the stony earth. This ungenerous earth was divided into hectares of a few thousand acres further divided into a handful of farms worked by sharecroppers and owned by an overlord called a peasant proprietor. The Rosselli family, descendants of one of the pastoral families of the Middle Ages, had maintained control of the land in the town of Cerignola for many centuries. Pietro Rosselli, Salvatore's half-uncle, was presently peasant proprietor in Cerignola, and Salvatore's father, Dominic Rosselli, Pietro's half-brother, was the only independent farmer in the territory.

Pietro and Dominic had had the same father, Zito Rosselli. Zito had been a man of titanic passions, with the putative sexual appetite of ten men. It was rumored in Cerignola and beyond that Zito's wife had died of exhaustion, not of the complications of childbirth as the official report had indicated. It was also widely known in Cerignola that since his wife's passing away, Zito had sired many bastard children by *mezzardi* women, the migrant farm workers who came and went with the seasons, sometimes taking their illegitimate offspring with them, sometimes leaving them on doorsteps or drowning them in the marshes. But there was one such *mezzardi* woman, a victim of Zito's lust, who had given birth to his child and adamantly refused to go away. She wanted a name for her son and some comfort for herself, and she tried to cajole, then force, then blackmail Zito into marrying her. It was a fatal mistake. Zito had her killed, but he could not bring himself to slay the child, so he