**Chapter 1 – New Orleans, 1908**

Every detail had to be perfect, as if their lives depended upon it. On this night, it just might.

Corrado picked up the pieces of the final place setting, one by one, careful not to scratch the delicate surfaces of the fine silver-plated utensils, the ones brought out for just the most special occasions. He made sure to hold each piece with thumb and forefinger, by their necks, so that his father could grab them by their handles, just the way he preferred.

“Here you go, Papa.” He handed the last one to his father, who did not look up from his task.

Corrado watched as his father, Pietro, slowly laid each utensil carefully into place, in perfect formal order, straightening each one after the setting was complete. Always set from left to right, neatly centered, on perfectly folded white linen napkins.

He stood by as patiently as he could, until he could wait no more. “Okay, Papa, it looks good to me.”

When his father failed to reply, he called out, more urgently, “Papa, do you hear me, it’s fine.”

Pietro turned his large, melon shaped head, even larger appearing due to his oversized mustache and shock of unkempt salt and pepper hair. “It is not enough to be good, it must be *perfect*. We all make choices, and some choose to be good, and others to be perfect. It was my choosing to be perfect that created this business, made it thrive, and bought us this fine home. And I will not choose anything but perfection, especially on this day, which may be the most important day of our lives.”

Corrado exhaled and suppressed a soft smile. The familiarity of his father’s words momentarily distracted him from thoughts of the evening’s negotiations, thoughts he played over and again in his mind while he tossed in bed at night. Distracted him from the fear and excitement, from the anticipation and uncertainty. From the magnitude of his plan, and the possibility of its failure.

He shook his head, brought himself back into the moment, and addressed his father. “Papa, you speak often of choices, and of making good choices.” He paused and twirled the edges of his thin, jet black mustache with his fingers. “But Papa, what if there are no good choices?”

Pietro stopped what he was doing and looked directly into Corrado’s eyes. “There are times when there are no good choices. That’s what happened to me in Palermo, and I made the most of it. Sometimes you don’t get to do what you’d like to do, or what you ought to do. Sometimes you do what you must.”

Corrado paused, signaling respect for his father’s words, then replied in his most considered tone. “Yes, Papa, I know, and we're grateful for your courage and achievements. Now can you check on the Stigghiola while I go down to the cellar and bring up a case of wine.”

The corner of Pietro’s eyes crinkled as his face pulled itself into a broad smile. “Yes, son, that is indeed a good choice.”

Corrado turned and headed down the steep stairs, taking them two at a time, to the large dusty cellar where they stored their wares. He turned on the electric light, took a moment to admire the brilliant tungsten bulbs they’d just installed, and strolled up and down the aisles of dusty crates, some covered with fancy labels all in Italian, some with the simple markings of homemade raisin wine, looking for the perfect case.

*It must be expensive looking*, he thought*, but not so expensive as to arouse suspicions. And high enough in alcohol content to achieve its intended effect.*

Finally, he settled on a case of Valpolicella*.*

*Perfect. Dark, red, and rich tasting. And the highest alcohol content of all the wines.*

He leaned over and hoisted a full case onto his broad shoulder, closed his eyes for a moment to let the dust settle around him, headed up the stairs, and placed the case next to the dining room table.

“Papa, I put the wine in the dining room.” He took a moment to catch his breath. “They’ll be here soon, is everything ready?”

“There’s just one thing left,” Pietro replied from the kitchen, then set down the ladle he’d been using to stir the stew, walked into the living room, and opened the doors of the large wooden armoire across from the fireplace. He looked inside for a moment, leaning over and fumbling with some items, moving them from one side to the other, then reached down and picked up something with his right hand, and turned and headed silently back towards the kitchen.

As he passed, Corrado noticed the long, wooden handle of their Winchester repeating rifle in his father’s right hand.

Pietro continued into the kitchen, placed the rifle carefully behind the half-opened door, and turned back towards his son. “There. Now everything is perfect indeed.”