

**PROLOGUE: GRAVE CONSPIRACY**

*April 1915 – Ticino Switzerland*

The fiery sunset had flamed briefly in the crisp, blue sky. Trees, formerly silhouetted like statues against the brilliant heavens, had joined with the earth in darkness.

Rosario lay on his side, his blanket tight around him as he studied the fire. The flames burned brightly, snatching at the air around them in a mesmerizing ballet. Rosario closed his eyes hoping to sleep but knowing he would not. He opened them quickly to replace the pictures that had come to his mind. He didn't want to see them or to remember. He'd lived in regret since the moment it had happened and he longed for the images to leave, to be replaced by visions of his wife and home, of her full body and the baby she would soon deliver.

The fire was beginning to slow. Soon it would vanish, left to die so that their occupation of the mountains could be denied. It would not do for enemy spies to see the glow and follow it to their encampment. But while it blazed, he could take comfort in the distraction it gave from the gloom spreading around him. And he could picture home, his own fire in his own hearth and Abrigela beside it waiting for him.

The brilliant blaze swayed hazily around the logs, moving slowly, slowly...

He never knew when the dream started, when reality turned into the subjective whims of his mind, but now the flames were darting in and out of the red embers, rising triumphantly in orange swags capped with tapered, blue tips. Rosario saw the flames movement as it danced around the rocks in its bed. He watched it begin to rise from the stones, twisting, twirling, cavorting, in a brilliant skirt of colors, rising so he could see it swirling towards him. He saw the hand reaching out to him, the fingers reaching for his as he turned his face upward towards the deep-set eyes.

"No." he said the word loudly but she didn't seem to hear.

"No, stop. No, not me." The hand still reached towards him, pulling at his hand, gently but persistently.

"Go away."

He woke with a start as Luigi shook him. His words were crisp but quiet, his expression, puzzled. "Stop out. You'll alert them. Who knows who hides on the mountain? You'll be heard." Rosario looked into the familiar eyes of his childhood friend and shook his head to indicate he was awake and understood.

Rosario eased back into his bedroll and looked around. The moon was not visible in the narrow chamber between the tall mountains and the trees that rimmed their peaks.

He glanced over to see if Luigi was still awake.

He could not remember a time when he had not known Luigi. They had always lived in Tamarelto. They had splashed each other learning to swim in the creek, bragged together how they would climb Monte Tamaro. They had run up and down the steep hillsides scattering their neighbors' chickens and cows, shaking the apple tree to get fruit to eat with the cheese they'd snatched from their mothers' ageing rooms. Eagerly, they had sat on the steps in front of their parents' homes using soft, old clothes to shine their fathers' guns. They had attended their eighteen weeks of military training together only the year before.

The only thing they had not done together, it seemed to Rosario as he lay on the rocky ground remembering, was their courting. Still, Luigi had been with him nearly every minute he and Abrigela had been together and, likewise, she had been with them many of the hours they had prowled the hills. Many times when he thought he would find Luigi hiding high in a tree, it had been a very young Abrigela, eyes bright and quick, who had looked back at him through the leaves.

At first, her accompanying them had been at the suggestions of Luigi's mother, Senora Veris, in need of someone to mind her daughter. The nine year old boys had been hesitant to include her in their jaunts, but at six, she had proven her ability to maintain their adeptness in physically demanding—as well as mischievously creative—adventures. It hadn't been until Luigi had begun noticing the other girls in the village and told Abrigela that she could not tag along with them that Rosario realized that he was fascinated by the sturdy young girl who was beginning to slim and shape into a women. Her deep, brown eyes were inquisitive, caring and secretive. Rosario and Abrigela went with Luigi and his sweethearts on walks and picnics, but there was never a time when they would not have been happier just sitting by the fire at the Veris home sipping the hot chocolate milk Abrigela's mother was always pleased to serve them.

He would always remember the way her eyes had sparkled on those nights when they, with Luigi and a girl from a nearby hamlet had skied on Monte Tamaro. It was on one of those nights when Rosario, sitting close to Abrigela near the bonfire they'd built together, had asked Abrigela to marry him. Her eyes had been so full of happiness that when Luigi and his friend finished their ski run, Luigi had immediately guessed. That had been the same expression she had as she looked at him beside the altar; the same sparkle he'd seen after Luigi, his best man, handed him her ring and he put it on her finger. And just a few months ago, her eyes had gleamed in her glowing face, her cheeks flushed with pleasing him, as she held his hand against the slight movements at her middle.

He had felt a certain pride, even satisfaction, that he had married and would be a father before Luigi would wed. Luigi and Maya would say their vows in a few months, but the baby Abrigela carried would be the Biundos' first grandchild as well as that of the Veris. The two boys, now

men, had always been competitive although it had never hurt their friendship. Before, Luigi had nearly always won their games. It felt good to be the frontrunner in their adult rivalries.

He could not help but be pleased when the chief of the underground Swiss ally supporters had asked him to take responsibility for leading the small group of men who they were gathering along the Italian border. Switzerland was in the center of Europe and of World War I. With France to the west, Germany and Austria to the north and northeast, and Italy to the south, any invasion and subjugation of the rugged, mountainous area would become an immense advantage to the conqueror and an enormous disadvantage to the defeated. Switzerland had designated the counties desire to be neutral. They had mandated that each man keep his own guns and ammunition in readiness at his home and have military training to guarantee that Switzerland could maintain its neutrality. But that didn't mean that some of their citizens did not want to further the cause of one of the warring entities. Others thought it essential that their mountains be used to safeguard the entire continent from the horrors of a central clash of the war.

Rosario had been open about his support of the Swiss neutrality. The pub had been full with more than a dozen men the night he'd announced his coming fatherhood and drank more than usual before becoming somewhat boisterous as he defended Swiss neutrality. It felt good to speak his mind and assert his manhood in front of his friends.

He didn't know why Senor Mustachia had chosen him for a leader. Mustachia, explained that he was covertly searching for men who would privately stop any group planning to back one of the warring countries, breaking the solidarity of Swiss neutrality. He had told Rosario that once Rosario accepted his role as a leader, there would be no turning back. The position seemed like a commendation, a reward from Mustachia, for some behind-the-scene heroism that no one else, including Rosario himself, had noticed. Perhaps it was recognition of some characteristic or attitude needful in an officer, also previously unobserved? Rosario wondered if he would ever know what attracted the leader's attention to him and changed his fate.

He hadn't really thought about it that much. Rather, he had spent more time at the tavern listening to the men, and on occasion, visiting them in private and later, inviting the more patriotic of the group to join him on the mountain for the training sessions Mustachia had suggested. Generally they had spent their time discussing their cause; infrequently they shared ideas on defending against invading forces or traitors. Mustachia had not given Rosario any information to share on fighting so they talked about techniques for long lengths of time and even experimented with several of the things that were suggested.

Luigi had mentioned warning signals in case there should be a surprise attack. Two stones pounded together to sound like a Great Spotted Woodpecker would tell of armed enemies approaching. The mention of a goat, an animal not usually found on Monte Tamaro, meant there was a spy in their midst. If one member of the group needed to alert the rest before making an unexpected move, he would cough twice then clear his throat. They practiced each drill several

times until one of them asked what signal they should use to warn the rest that Luigi was cooking that night. They laughed while they gathered their things and headed back to their homes.

It had gone well. More than a dozen men from the Monte Tamaro area secretly gathered to prepare in the event they were needed.

Now they were ready.

Mustachia never joined with the group—no one but Rosario had met him—but he questioned Rosario at their chance meetings.

It had been a week since the day Rosario had taken the trip. He only meant to go to Vira, a hamlet on Lake Maggiore, where he could mail the report Mustachia had asked him to send to Ascona, a village across the lake. He had been surprised when he walked down the hill towards the lake at Vira, to see Mustachia seated outside a tavern. Mustachia had seemed delighted to have the unexpected encounter with him. He looked briefly at the report Rosario handed him then slapped him on the back, congratulating him for a job much superior to the one he had expected. He ordered wine for them both but they had barely had a sip before he pulled Rosario with him toward the shore. “We must celebrate such good work,” he said, “and celebrate we will.” Before Rosario could decline the merry-making Mustachio proposed, he was stepping into a boat headed to the south.

“You’re not going to Ascona?” Rosario asked.

“No, no. We will enjoy ourselves. You are a good leader. You have your troops well trained and enthused to keep our countries neutrality. You deserve a reward, a real reward. We will go to Verbania in Italy so no one will learn how well we have enjoyed ourselves.”

Rosario frowned. “I would rather celebrate with Abrigela than go to Italy.”

“Oh, but you do not understand. Leaders do not party as lower ranking men do. Do not demean your rank. You, my friend, must learn. To be a leader you must go to Italy and reward yourself. The trip is short. We will be back to your Abrigela in Tamarelto tomorrow. And then I will tell you of the coming event when I shall come to review your troops--truly reasons to celebrate.”

“But...”

The older man turned from him. “Wine.” He called out. “We will have wine—a good wine and plenty of it--while we travel.” He filled the cups the steward provided and pushed one into Rosario’s hand.

“Enjoy yourself. You have earned it. Drink up.”

Rosario could not withstand the man’s pressure any more than he could hours later, sitting beside him in a crowded tavern by a warm fire, surrounded by men smelling of work, women

circling around them with platters of fish and food with wine—always wine. He had found the food too rich for his taste, the wine far too abundant and his greatest wish was to close his eyes and sleep. But Mustachia continued piling food on his plate, telling him that a leader must indulge.

It was late when the women left their platters by the ovens and began to rotate around the tables. Rosario watched their dizzying dances as they passed by the tables. They only carried tankards of wine now, as they brushed against the shoulders of their guests and bent to delicately place the replenished cups in the men's hands.

"I'll be going now." Rosario tried to tell Mustachio though he found it very hard to speak and harder to stand.

"No, no. The fun is now to begin." The man said comfortably. "A leader does not leave his ranks with the conquest at its peak."

Rosario could only see the fire as Mustachia beckoned to someone across the room, then pointed at him.

The chill of the forest reminded Rosario where he was and he turned in his blankets. He wished he could see Abrigela; wished he could hear her soft breathing, smell the freshness of her hair. He had only wanted her. He had never wanted another. How could he tell her, or should he? Mustachio would never confess to the doings of that night in front of a woman. He had assured Rosario the next morning that he now knew the role of the leader; a leader had his rights and he must know to use them but not tell others about them.

Rosario twisted again then looked out into the night. It was no use. He could not sleep. He pulled his blanket over his shoulders. The night was cold and the embers of their fire still offered heat but he wandered from them and the men sleeping near them. He had to think. He walked up the mountain to the edge of a cluster of trees then lay down on his blanket and looked up at the dim stars.

Had he made the right choice when he had agreed to join with Mustachia in an endeavor to help maintain Swiss neutrality? Rosario did not doubt that neutrality was essential but he no longer felt respect or goodwill for Mustachia or his style of leadership. Had the Italian revelry been necessary or even beneficial to either of them? Mustachia had made sure Rosario had too much alcohol and that he was beyond using wisdom that night. Rosario was shocked and ashamed. He despised the man who had caused him to be unfaithful to Abrigela. But he would see him soon and show him the skills of the group he had gathered then trained.

Would Mustachia invite him to celebrate again? And if he refused would Mustachia insist that he go, ridiculing him in front of his men, forcing him, amidst their boisterous but friendly banter, to join in his festivities? How could Rosario resist? What could he say? A few men would laugh at

Rosario if he told him he did not need or want to celebrate without Abrigela. Mustachia had supported Rosario's aspirations for his country and helped him plan a way to organize the men of Tamarelto so they could have a significant impact to the Swiss' peace effort. Could he stand in defiance of the man who had done all that for them when all Mustachia wanted was to be amused?

He closed his eyes and tried to close off his thoughts.

The pine needles snapped behind him. There was movement close to him; boots shuffled through the foliage beside him.

Italians invading Switzerland? Swiss traitors betraying their homeland? Mustachia coming to review the Tamarelto troop at night? With more men?

Wouldn't Mustachia send a notice of his coming, announce his presence when he arrived? But if the noise did not come from Mustachia, then the invaders must be enemies.

Rosario quietly reached into the needles around him trying to find two stones. He would clap two rocks together to warn his men. He fingered one hard, rounded surface but could not find a similar piece.

He began to rise, shedding his bedding as he did.

The movement, the darkness blocking the stars from his view, reached into the sky above him

Mustachio's boot kicked forcefully against his ribs before he could stand.

"Fool," the man laughed at Rosario's surprise. "Caught by your own stupidity. Fool and coward." He kicked at Rosario again and again. "Afraid to stand against a law that helps no one. Willing to fight, you say, but only for a law that makes your country impotent. Afraid to be a man, to enjoy a night of wine and women. You fool. You Swiss are useless like your Italian neighbors. Useless."

Rosario's breath was knocked from him. His lungs begged for oxygen but he found it impossible to pull air into them. But the brutal man's foot work had uncovered another rock and rolled it Rosario's side. Rosario slowly slid it towards him on his blanket.

"But you have done what I asked, what I wanted! You have collected all the men who would have fought for neutrality for Switzerland from Tamarelto so that I can destroy them. Gone. All our oppositions force gone in one massacre. Of course you could not know that I wanted to identify the men who favored neutrality so they could be exterminated before they caused trouble if our German brothers attempted to gain control of the region. It will take only a few of us to do our job tonight and there will be no wasted time or blood later. You have gathered our opposition and we will easily annihilate you all by morning."

His eyes glared into Rosario's as though he was a slothful, incapable child.

"What a conceited, little man you are." Mustachio bent down to Rosario's level near the ground and hissed the words out. "You think that I would choose you for your valor, your courage?" he laughed then continued to talk, sarcasm thick in his phrases. "You think I chose you because you would make a good leader?" he chortled again, unaware of the shadowy figure slowly climbing the hill behind him. "You a leader? I chose you because you are a fool who would follow my commands without questions. And these who have surrounded you are nearly as brainless."

Rosario did not look at the man stealthily creeping towards Mustachia, his eyes as dark and vivid as Abrigela's, so familiar to Abrigela's. Luigi stopped as he listened to Mustachio's words.

"Brainless and fearful. Afraid. Afraid," he repeated then snickered.

Luigi moved closer.

"You were afraid to spend a night away from your wife. You should have appreciated the Italian woman who entertained you. She was more than you deserved. Stupid. Stupid to leave her so soon and wait at the dock for sunrise."

Luigi's face darkened. He shrunk back under a tree, invisible to Rosario and the other men Rosario could now see infiltrating the pines, hiding behind the tree trunks.

Rosario glanced from the spot where Luigi had disappeared to Mustachio's face. He knew that most likely his move would be his last, that he would never be able to explain to Abrigela, never see her again, never hold his child—their child. But if his action could save the lives of any of his men or pay in the least way for his sin, it would be worth the price.

He coughed loudly twice. Mustachia must have attributed the cough and the red stain that came with it to his beating because he didn't attempt to stop Rosario. He coughed again, pulling the stones together in front of him, then began tapping them together.

"Stop that! Stop that or I will stop it." Mustachia shouted, grabbing at one of the stones. He could not flip it from Rosario's grasp.

Rosario firmed his grip upon the heavy stones. He looked towards the tree where he'd last seen Luigi, whispering, "Please, help her understand."

There was a noisy buzz as Bethany stood in the front of the Young Women's classroom. She had dressed casually and pulled her hair back into an elastic hoping to seem like one of the girls. Now she wasn't sure that had been a smart idea.

"Girls." She raised her voice to get their attention but the small group of teenagers didn't seem to hear her. "Young ladies," she persisted, "It's time to close. There are refreshments in the kitchen." That caused a lull. "Does anyone have any questions before the closing prayer?"

The girls looked at each other, a few giggling while one of the sixteen year olds, Shannon Whitley, whispered to Ally Marshalle. Bethany watched her young friend as she smiled back at Shannon and shook her head agreeably. Their eyes sparked with a mischievous glint that made Bethany wonder what they had planned. The rest of the girls quieted.

It had only been a few weeks since Bethany had been called to be the Walachias Ward girls' camp director, but she was beginning to know and enjoy the girls and—seeing them grinning then quieting as they had—to suspect they were up to something.

Bethany looked at the group. The older girls sat on the back row leaving the younger group to span the three rows in front of them. Only one girl, a small, barely twelve years old who had recently moved into the area, sat alone in the front row. Winslow, who had spoken so quietly during the introductions that Bethany had not heard her last name, turned to look at the older girls.

Shannon raised her hand but Bethany saw the expression on her face.

“Is this a question that needs to be asked before or after closing prayer?” Bethany asked with her own suspicions apparent in her blue eyes.

“Well, after the prayer, I guess.” Shannon replied with a questioning glance at Ally. The two friends had talked to Bethany about camp as soon as they learned she was going to be the director. They had wondered if Ally could go even though she was not a member of the Church—although she had already begun reading the Book of Mormon. Ally looked a tiny bit sheepish as she shook her head. “Uh, after the prayer.”

A few quiet giggles were suppressed before the prayer was said but the girls began looking at each other expectantly after it was finished. Little Winslow was the only one to stand, anxious to go get refreshments. Instead the rest sat waiting as Shannon raised her hand again. Winslow quickly sat back down, looking around to see if anyone had noticed her faux pau.

Bethany hesitantly nodded at Shannon. “Did you have a question?”

“Sister Carlyle,” she paused as if debating what to say, “Did Dr. Somers kiss you when you got engaged?”

“Well, Duh.” One of the girls from the back row commented before Shannon continued.

“Did you want him to?” she added faking innocence.

Bethany could feel her face flush. She rolled her eyes at the girls then turned back to the table without answering. She tried to ignore the titter as she gathered her materials while they clustered in groups and moved towards the door.

Winslow carefully listened to the conversations around her as she followed the rest of the girls from the room. Bethany gave her a quick smile, wondering how the girl who seemed so much younger than the rest would fit in at camp.

Bethany stopped at the family history library to see if Lois was ready to go. Lois Clinshaw and Bethany both lived on Seacrest Island but Faunce Cove, Bethany's home, was on the opposite side of the island from Lois' small rental. Lois had become very interested in her family history a few weeks earlier when Bethany discovered the small, abandoned town where Lois' ancestors had lived for several generations. When Lois googled family history, she had read some of the material on Mormonism, and knowing that Bethany was a Mormon, had begun asking questions. She had ridden up to Walachias with Bethany and spent the evening having a lesson with the missionaries, then stopped for a few minutes in the family history library while Bethany taught her class.

"Did you find anything?" Bethany asked as Lois gathered her material.

"There's a three or four generation gap between the people I've connected and the person I think is their ancestor. I'll need to do some more checking."

Bethany and Lois walked to the car to wait for Ally.

Bethany was glad to have the company of both the young women on the drive from the chapel on the mainland to Seacrest Island. She had gotten to know Ally when they'd researched the history of Faunce Cove and discovered the first residents of the area, was Bethany's ancestors. Bethany had remodeled the old, original, colonial house into the home she now called her Hut.

Bethany waved to Winslow who sat in her parents' car watching the other girls break from their groups and separate to their own rides.

Shannon and Ally continued talking as Ally got into the car, rolled down her window and clicked in her seat belt, then leaned out to say goodbye.

"Hey, phone me. We can plan what to take to camp." Shannon called to Ally as she trotted across the church parking lot to her mother's car.

Bethany put the car into gear. She was glad Ally was going with the girls. She had never been to camp as a girl and she'd heard unexpected things could happen. It would help to have someone she could talk to if things got too exciting.

"I always had a good time at summer camp." Lois commented. "We did some fun things."

"We're waiting." Bethany quipped.

"You really want to hear the kind of things you'll be dealing with out there?"

Ally sat forward in the back seat so she could hear better.

“You bet. I need to know what I’m up against so I can prepare, especially after the questions I got tonight,” Bethany glanced teasingly at Ally. “I figure I need to know everything.”

“Well, I went camping with the same group of girls every year. The oldest girls got to be in a cabin while the younger ones were in tents. One year some of the older girls were pretty snooty. They were always taking our snacks from the freezer to eat after everyone was asleep. We snuck out to watch them one night. Sure enough, they came out of the storage room loaded with our goodies but we didn’t have anything to use to get even. The next day we were on kitchen duty and while we were straightening the cafeteria, we did a quick search through the pantry. We found a jar of pickled beets and we poured out the juice, mixed some powdered milk with it and beat it until it was frothy. It looked so good. Then we found some ground red pepper, added it, poured it into popsicle molds and put it in the freezer. It looked really great—kind of like raspberry sherbet. We hid by the kitchen when the older girls came and blocked the door so no one could get out for water. You could hear them yelling and howling for miles that night.”

“Did you let them out?”

“The camp counselors heard the noise and came running so the younger girls had to get back to their tents, but the next day we heard that a couple of the counselors tried the popsicles too.”

Ally laughed. “You do know counselors and directors get pranks pulled on them, too, don’t you?” she questioned Bethany.

“Now, do directors and counselors get to pull pranks too?”

“Well...” Lois began.

“Let’s not talk about that,” Ally answered with a chuckle.

“Hmm. I can’t think of anyone at camp that could stop them.” Lois commented wryly.

“Especially if the girls kept, let’s say, talking about a certain situation which they don’t really know a lot about.” Bethany added as she drove across the bridge onto Seacrest Island and turned up North Road towards Lois’ house.

“Hey,” Ally responded innocently. “Mormon girls would never talk about their leader and her fiancé—who happens to be the most handsome guy who has ever been in Walachia, would they? His voice is deep, his eyes are deep brown and he is deeply in love with his fiancé. The girls would never talk. Never.”

“Right.” Lois laughed. “Have you guys set a date?” she asked Bethany.

“Not yet. All we’ve decided for sure about our wedding is that it will be in the Boston Temple. We haven’t had time to think about any other plans. I’ve been trying to get my manuscript finished and the tours of the mansion set up and Rob has been caught up in the medical conference in Europe”

“Will he be flying back there or is that over.”

“There will be another one in a year or so, but for right now, he is deciding whether he wants to set up a clinic for patients with medical issues and need rehab, just establish his own practice, or spend all his time doing research.”

“And,” Ally pretended to hold a microphone in front of Bethany’s mouth,

“According to the bride, the winner is...”

“I haven’t really thought about it. It’s up to Rob. A regular practice would probably include more unusual hours and less family time, but Rob is so good with people I’d hate to see him shut away doing research. A clinic might give him a chance to do both, or it might drive him crazy trying to do everything.”

“And,” Ally continued, “Where would the esteemed doctor start this practice or clinic or research?”

“That is another question we haven’t had time to talk about. He’s already got patients in Boston, but I’d much rather live up here.”