

Chapter 1

It was an August morning when Father Giovanni Violetti found the courage to drive to the Fletcher house. He learned that Matthew Fletcher had a woodworking job out on the bay so Gio took the opportunity to spend some time alone with Mrs. Fletcher. Cruising along River Road in his shiny black Lincoln, he smiled gratefully as the refreshing breeze blew through the window. Loosening his collar Father Giovanni reached over to the passenger seat to make sure the bottle of wine was well cushioned in his cardigan. He turned up the volume on the radio to hear the news report on the Woodstock concert from the weekend before.

He wished he had been there. Almost a million young people had traveled to a farmer's field in upstate New York. Those youngsters seemed to have so much freedom, and the ability to pick up and go on a whim. He was turning thirty soon and had accepted that he really hadn't had that taste for adventure, even when he was a teenager — unlike his brother Roberto.

As Gio came to the intersection of River Road and MacDonald, he noticed a black and white police car to his left. Its exterior was covered with a dusty grey film — likely from cruising some of the dry back roads. Someone had written “wash me” on the rear passenger door.

Sitting inside, smoking a cigarette and smiling, Constable Paul Brown let his left arm dangle through the driver's window. *I guess his job must be boring in this small town,* Gio concluded, *nothing much seems to happen.*

Brown waved Gio through. Gio smiled and waved back. He was glad that he had been able to convince the diocese to let him use the car his family had donated. He appreciated the reliability of a solid vehicle and the ease with which it could get him around town, since lately his knees had started to hurt from his increasing weight.

He approached the Fletcher's property at the foot of Tower Hill Road and Harbour Road, pulled the large Lincoln into the driveway and turned off the engine.

Gio leaned back against the leather seat then promptly corrected his position as he felt the sweat dripping down his large, hairy back. The gold crucifix dangling around his neck reflected the summer sunlight onto the dashboard. He sat with the windows opened and mentally prepared himself for the visit.

He had only arrived in Seguin Sound a few weeks ago. It was a refreshing improvement to the inner-city parishes in which he had begun his work. He appreciated the small-town atmosphere, although it was boring, the closeness to nature, the constant slow movement of the river below, and the refreshing openness of Georgian Bay. Most of the people living here seemed to move at the same relaxed pace.

Gio wiped perspiration from his brow, adjusted his black-framed glasses and scanned the property. On his right was the Fletcher home, a large, sturdy green two-story house with an attached shed. The front lawn was well kept, as were the few patches of irises and tiger lilies.

To the left, there were what looked like two garden plots. Leftmost, between their yard and the neighbour's, were a few small, twisted pine trees growing atop a small knoll. He saw two young redheaded girls and a dark-haired girl climbing, swinging and jumping from the little pines then running to a hammock strung up between one of the trees and the clothesline pole. They seemed to be having a great time. *Weren't they hot?* He

wondered. Father Gio had already met the redheads after church on Sunday. They were the precocious ten-year-old twins, Dela and Gwen.

One of the twins (he could not tell them apart from a distance) seemed preoccupied with burying something in the soil and patting it down with a small spade. Behind her back of their neighbour's property was a pine forest that stretched up the hill and beyond.

To the rear was a large flat rock upon which was a fire pit surrounded by log benches. Straight ahead, stretching towards the trestle of the high and looming CP Rail Bridge, ran a small pathway that led towards another cluster of buildings. Beyond this view was Georgian Bay.

Near the back of the house was a large tree, a deciduous of some sort, thick with green leaves casting cool shade onto the backyard. The Fletcher's property looked pleasant and provided a safe place for children to play.

Children. He sighed. Gio placed his hands on the steering wheel, almost in an embrace and bowed his head. He softly repeated words he used seven years ago when confessing to his mentor after his carnal indiscretion. This was different.

"Heavenly Father, please give me courage to face this possibility, to accept the facts as they are presented. Please forgive me for my indiscretion so many years ago. One act of weakness... Whatever you will for me, I accept."

The scorching reflections from his crucifix bounced around the interior of the car as he prayed for courage and forgiveness. His heart was pounding in anticipation.

Children. A child. What if she is my child? His curiosity had hounded him enough to check the baptism registry at Saint Peter's church. Her birth date was too coincidental. *Why do they spell her name S-e-r-a? Why on the very first Sunday I am serving at this parish do I learn this information? That woman looked so familiar. The one-and-only time I ever had intimate relations with a woman and... I have to find out if it really is her. I have to solve this mystery.*

Gio took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, forcing his large body out of the car. He stood for a few seconds adjusting his glasses and cross. He flapped his damp black dress shirt to cool his round torso, wiped his greasy black curls back, and pushed his straw hat down firmly upon his head. He reached in and grabbed the bottle of 1962 Violelli Red — his gift to the Fletchers.

As soon as Gio closed the car door, the redheads and their friend turned their attention to the driveway and came bounding down to greet him.

"Hi, Father Gio!" called Gwen and Dela in unison. At this point, he still didn't know one from the other. They were wearing matching shorts and T-shirts.

"Hello, girls." He responded politely. "Are you enjoying this hot summer day?"

"Oh, yeah," chirped one, "We're going to the beach with Amy and her Mom later."

"Hello," said Gio as he extended his chubby hand to the friend — a petit Asian girl, "Are you Amy? I'm Father Gio."

Amy looked straight up at him with her dark eyes while shaking his hand, her delicate fingers squeezing two of his, "Hello, Father Gio."

"We're treasure planting," chirped the other redhead.

"Oh, really? What does that mean?"

"Oh, we're putting small treasures around the yard so they can be discovered in one hundred years. You know, like they found in Egypt with King Tut? Except, we're not using real gold and jewels, just trinkets."

"Ah," Gio nodded and responded politely. He smiled at them and wiped the perspiration from his brow. He looked at the twins one by one. Ah, yes. I think it was Gwen who had the crooked smile and ear. "Girls, are your parents around?" He asked.

One piped in, "Dad's working away on the bay but Mom's inside."

"Oh, I see," he said feigning disappointment. "Well, if your mother is not too busy, may I speak with her please?"

"Sure, come on back to the shade," the girl said as she grabbed his hand and led him past the driveway to a set of lawn chairs under the tree. Amy and the other one ran across the back porch and into the house.

"Thank you...Gwen...." he thought he'd take a chance at the name and seemed to have succeeded, "It's so nice here in the shade," Gio removed his hat, wiping his handkerchief across his brow, "I can even feel a breeze."

"Uh-huh," the girl responded, "Would you like a cold drink?"

"Oh, I would love a cold drink, Gwen!"

"I'll be right back!" she shouted, already running towards the house.

Okay then, he concluded, Gwen is the one with the crooked left ear. At least I've got that straight — as long as they're not wearing hats!

Gio tested the sturdiness of one of the lawn chairs then sat quietly under the tree, enjoying the gentle breeze. The sound of cicadas buzzed loudly around him, seeming mostly to come from the pine forest. He looked around the immediate area. This seemed to be a favourite spot for the family as he observed the chairs and lounge. A small red object plopped onto his lap. Another bounced off his belly. He picked up one of the small orbs then turned to look up at the tree, squinting into the sunlight radiating through the leaves. *Ah, it's a cherry tree, he concluded, likely one of the Pin Cherry species. I wonder how they are for wine.*

Gio's family had operated a vineyard in the Tuscany region of Italy for many decades. When he was small, his parents immigrated to Canada to start a vineyard in southern Ontario. Growing up on his family's land, he had learned quite a bit about grapes, wine and other fruit-bearing trees.

He rubbed the small orb in between his large fingers then popped it into his mouth for a taste. Ooh! A little sour, he discovered, puckering his face as he leaned over the side of the chair to spit out the pit.

As he sat cooling off, he recalled meeting the family after mass last Sunday.

Father O'Reilly had introduced him to the entire congregation during mass and again individually in the reception hall. Gio had shaken hands with many parishioners, husbands, wives and children. The older priest called over Matthew Fletcher whom he referred to as the godsend carpenter who had repaired some of the aging pews. Matthew was a muscular, tanned man with rough hands and gentle, blue eyes. Shaking his hand, Gio had felt a warm connection with him.

Matthew had gestured over to some people at the other side of the crowded hall to call them over. Two redheaded girls of the same age clung to a woman's side while they mischievously stared at the new priest.

"Father Gio," he said, "I would like to introduce my wife and a couple of our children." He pulled closer to his side a small, attractive woman with reddish-brown hair and vivid green eyes whose face became clearer as she raised it to meet his gaze.

"Georgette!" Gio blurted out. His knees nearly gave in and he felt the blood leaving his

face. His mind flashed with memories of a beautiful woman, sweet desserts, and a winter's night of passion.

"No..." responded Matthew quizzically, "This is Marie."

"Oh, ohhh. So sorry. Mea Culpa. Nice to meet you, Marie," fumbled Gio with a prolonged handshake. "You look very much like someone I knew years ago..."

Her hands were so soft and cool. He didn't want to let go.

One of the redheaded girls piped in, "Georgette is our aunt in Montreal." Gio forced his gaze to the twins standing side-by-side in their Sunday best, smiling at him with their sun-burnt faces. The only difference he could perceive was that one had a crooked grin and her left ear was slightly bent. The odd-looking twin asked, "Do you know Aunt Georgette?"

Gio stuttered, "Uh, err, I'm not sure. It was long ago." He grimaced awkwardly at the girls, then Marie. He could feel the perspiration trickling down his back and into the crack of his buttocks.

Marie spoke next, smiling nervously, "It is nice to meet you, Father Gio. These are our daughters Dela and Gwen. The boys, you have met... they were the altar boys today... Daniel and Perry."

"Yes," he agreed. "Good boys." He turned and smiled to the redheads, "Hello, Dela. Hello, Gwen."

"I want to be an altar girl," said Dela.

The grown-ups laughed nervously at this young girl's bold statement.

"Seriously," she continued, "I really do. How about you, Gwen?"

"Sure," replied her twin, "Sounds like fun."

The rest of the conversation was polite with O'Reilly praising Matthew for the work he did for the church. Gio only remembered smiling and nodding, while gazing a few times at Marie. He was damn certain that she was the woman he had known intimately as Georgette seven years ago. She smiled and added politely to the conversation, avoiding eye contact with him.

Father O'Reilly piped in, "Now, where is the wee girl? Sera?"

Marie responded quickly, "Oh, she's with her new friend at her family's cottage. She'll be back tonight."

Gio's heart had jumped a beat. A wee girl? Another child?

A train whistle interrupted his reverie. The girls came skipping out of the house; Gwen, though, approached carefully with his drink with a theatrical expression. She handed it to him and offered her crooked smile.

"Here you go, Father Gio," she curtsied, "I even added a little more sugar for you."

"Oh... well. Thank you, Gwen." He took a sip to taste, concluded it was lemonade then took a few long gulps. "Ahhh! This is very refreshing. Thank you."

The trio of girls ran back up the little slope to the pine trees. Gio felt another cherry bounce off his head. Another bounced off his belly and into his glass. It felt as if a force greater than gravity was aiding in their delivery.

He adjusted his eyeglasses in preparation for a closer inspection of the tree. His peripheral vision caught movement: a woman's form approaching from the house. She was walking slowly, holding a tea towel and a glass of lemonade. She wore a light green summer dress. As she came closer, he recognized that walk. Those hips. As she came nearer, he was certain by that smile and those green eyes, this was the woman he once

knew as Georgette.

"Hello, Father Gio," She smiled nervously.

"Hello... Marie," he responded, raising his glass while struggling to rise from the chair. He reached down beside his chair to retrieve the wine bottle he brought.

"A gift from my family's vineyards."

"Thank you," smiled Marie as she accepted the bottle and put it on her lap as she sat in the other chair.

A cherry bounced forcefully off his head. Another plopped into his glass. As he looked up to see the source, he heard the train approaching, its horn blowing louder and more frequently as it approached the bridge.

Marie stood up and shouted to the tree, "Sera! What are you doing up there! Come down this instant!"

The train rattled through the forest on the hill and onto the bridge, three diesel engines were pulling a trail of cargo cars and wheels clack-clacking over the rails above them. It blew its horn again and rolled on towards the other side of the valley, dragging an assortment of boxcars, tank cars and flats in an endless stream behind it.

Gio looked at the train and winced at the noise. Marie gave him a look of embarrassed apology then moved closer under the tree. In the middle of the noise and commotion, they observed two bare feet then legs extend down from one of the limbs. Gingerly, a small blonde girl in blue shorts and T-shirt, hung from a low branch, then dropped to the soft grass below.

Gio's heart was pounding. Could this be? No, she's so fair and has dark blue eyes. She looked like an angel with her fine blonde hair in disarray and decorated with twigs. She had a peaches-and-cream complexion with rosy cheeks and a small brown freckle under her right eye.

"Is this Sera?" he shouted nervously over the noise from the train.

"No," responded Marie with a slow shake of her head, "This is her friend, Victoria."

Victoria smiled and waved at them then held out her arms upwards to the tree. Down into her arms dropped a stuffed rabbit, which she kissed on the nose and put on Marie's chair. Then she ran back and held out her arms again, catching a golden-brown teddy bear. It received a kiss on the nose as well.

By this time, the train had left. Its horn sounded in the distance, as it approached another level crossing. The air was finally quiet with only a light breeze rustling the leaves and the distant calls of chickadees and blue jays.

Gio's curiosity was piqued. He put his lemonade glass gently beside his chair, shuffled closer to look under the tree limbs, up into the green canopy. Down from one of the branches dangled two dirty bare feet, as another small girl hung from a limb.

"Uh oh!" she declared — then whoosh! She dropped right into Gio's arms.

"Whee!" she exclaimed, "That was close!"

"Sera!" shouted Marie.

"I'm here!" She looked up at Gio and said, "Oh, hello!"

Gio held her awkwardly in his arms. He looked down at the head of dark curls, the broad, mischievous smile and bright green eyes. She looked like an imp, an imp that had fallen into his unsuspecting arms.

His knees trembled but he held on tightly, cradling her in large, clumsy arms and fighting back tears of joy. "Hello, Sera. I'm so glad to meet you. I... am Father Gio."

“Hello, Father,” she responded in a matter-of-fact way.

He began shaking and perspiring. Slowly he bent to let her down gently onto the grass. As he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, he watched the girls grab their stuffed toys, skip to the patio then disappear into the house.

Gio's knees were wobbly. With a racing heart, he turned to look at Marie. Her face was drained, her eyes apologetic.

“Georg — Marie, is this girl...?”

“Yours? Ours?” she responded quietly in a tired tone, returning to her chair. He sat beside her and watched as she folded and unfolded the tea towel on her lap.

Gio reached for his glass of lemonade from the ground and took a long gulp.

“Why? How — I mean... Marie. Please. Tell me. Please.”

She looked up at him, fighting the urge to cry. Her face was flushed and her lips quivered.

“Yes.”

Gio sank back in his chair and let out a big breath. His heart was pounding. He felt exhilarated and drained at the same time. His mind was racing. A child. Our child.

“She’s beautiful, Marie.” He grasped his cross, kissed it then looked up towards the tree.

“It had to be a cherry tree, where I would meet this innocent and mischievous child, the fruit of your womb.”

“Ah, the cherries,” she sighed then smiled wistfully. “Cherry coulis.”

“And the coconut cream pastries...” chuckled Gio, then he whispered, “Sinful!”

Marie joined in the laughter and looked deeply into his eyes, her expression now serious.

“Gio, I didn’t plan this. I was going through some... problems at the time.”

“I understand. As was I. So, there was no sick cousin?”

“Oh, yes. She was Georgette — the real Georgette. But, she has recovered well and is acting on stage again.”

“That’s good to hear.” He breathed in deeply then exhaled slowly, “Sera seems healthy and bright.”

“Oh, yes! Bright and spirited to say it politely — as you have seen.”

“I checked the church records. She is baptized, thank goodness.”

“Yes, but she put up a great fuss. Poor Father O’Reilly. The whole church echoed with her cries.”

“Goodness!”

“Sera is a concern at times. She says she’s bored with church. Already. Can you believe it? She's only six years old.”

“Well,” offered Gio, “I have heard Father O’Reilly’s sermons...”

They laughed heartily. The world around them was awash in blue and green, complimented by a cool breeze from the bay and the occasional calls of blue jays and chickadees. They enjoyed the moment, smiling and absorbing what beauty and meaning they could.

Gio asked, “Marie, why is her name spelled S-e-r-a? Why not S-a-r-a-h? Was that an error on the Church’s part?”

“Oh, no mistake there,” she replied softly, “We liked the song by Doris Day and I remembered the few last words that you and I spoke after our ... encounter.”

“Yes,” recalled Gio, “I remember too. The song was playing on the hotel room radio. Que sera, sera,”

“Whatever will be, will be.”

"A child," whispered Gio, *I have so much to teach her*, he realized then wondered silently, *Is this why God has delivered me to this place?*

He spoke, childlike, "Marie, why am I here?"

"Oh, goodness. I don't know. Here on this planet? Here in this town?" She gave him a long, doubtful stare, "A form of punishment perhaps? For me? I have some explaining to do to my husband."

"Yes," Gio responded, "In my defense, I did not know you were married at the time. But... Matthew seems like such a wonderful man."

"Yes, I know. He has a kind and trusting nature."

"A child," he repeated softly in disbelief.

Sera and Victoria came out of the back door of the house, clutching their stuffed animals. They waved as they skipped lightly past the adults to meet the older girls at the little pine trees.

Gio finished his lemonade with three long gulps, being careful not to swallow the two cherries that had landed in the glass. He fished them out, wrapped them in a tissue and put them in his breast pocket.

"I must get back to the rectory," he said as he stood up and adjusted his damp clothes, "I am glad to have learned the truth."

"Yes," Marie said quietly as she looked up at him with her pleading eyes, "Not many people know... the truth, Gio."

He spoke assuredly, "Believe me, Marie. Our secret is safe — and in my position. Our first task together is to get Sera to come to church — and catechism."

"All the power to you," sighed Marie as she slowly sipped her lemonade.