

## Excerpt from *Crushed*:

Margaret walked up and down the few rows of Parker vines, carefully inspecting the heavy clusters of purple and partially green orbs. They were nearly ready. The smell of ripening fruit was heady, almost overpowering. She plucked a grape and popped it in her mouth, relishing the burst of sweet, tart flavor. A few more days.

Every winemaker knew that ninety-five percent of good winemaking began with the perfect grapes. She had them. The other five percent from the winemaker's personal touch and style. This year's crop would prove her ability and technique. She just had to follow through.

She heard the approach of a vehicle and turned, her hand up to shield her eyes from the bright afternoon sun. A sleek blue convertible sports car pulled up to the house. A man wearing a white collared shirt opened the car door and stepped out. The way he moved was familiar. He stood looking up at the house a moment before turning toward the vineyard, and pulling off his sunglasses. Even at this distance she recognized him.

August.

No. She wouldn't think of him as she once did. The nickname had been an endearment. Agosto Salvatore was nothing to her now. The man who left her pregnant and brokenhearted at fifteen, who fled to Italy without a thought for anyone but himself, did not deserve respect, let alone a pet name. For ten long years he hadn't tried to get in touch with her or have any contact with his son. He may have grown older, but she doubted he had grown kinder. Why had he returned now, after all these years?

He lifted a hand in greeting, hooked his glasses in the front of his shirt, and ambled slowly across the yard toward the vineyard as though she'd been expecting him. He was the last person she'd expected or wanted to see, and yet she knew he'd return, despite desperate prayers to the contrary.

She suddenly wondered what she must look like in worn out jeans with holes in the knees and one of Handel's castoff t-shirts splattered with blue and green paint. She supposed it was human nature to want him to desire her and regret his choice ten years ago, even though the last thing she wanted was a face-to-face confrontation with the man.

"Ciao, Margaret," he said, a slow smile climbing his face till his dark eyes glinted with that sexy light that once made her weak in the knees. He ran his fingers through his hair, brushing it smoothly from his forehead. It was still thick and wavy and for a moment she couldn't help remembering the feel of it in her hands when they kissed.

She licked her lips and tried to appear unimpressed with his fit, tanned body and playboy good looks. "What are you doing here? I told you not to come back."

"I didn't think you truly meant it. That man who was here before...does he work here?" he asked, glancing nervously back toward the house.

"What do you want, Agosto?" she asked, ignoring the question. Let him worry. Adam was younger, more muscular, and a head taller. She doubted Agosto would want to have a run-in with him. Perhaps it would keep him from overstaying his visit.

"You know what I want. I already told your brother. I want to spend time with my son. He needs to know his father. Where he comes from. Who he is."

"My son knows exactly who he is. He doesn't need you to tell him that, or to buy him fancy toys to convolute the message. He's smart and kind and honest and generous. He's a Parker, through and through. You had your chance to know him and now it's too late." She gripped the picking shears she held and tried to calm her temper.

His gaze turned steely and she knew from experience that he expected to get his way, no matter what it took. "I don't want to bring the court system into our private affairs, but if you give me no other choice..."

"How dare you come here with your rich man attitude and think you can take what you want. This is America, not Italy. And here you're just a deadbeat dad who deserted his son and hasn't paid a cent to help raise him. So, get in your fancy car and go home." She turned and started walking away. Fear tightened screws down on her heart. The thought of losing Davy through some fluke of the court system made her physically ill. She had to get away from him before he saw how frightened his words made her feel.