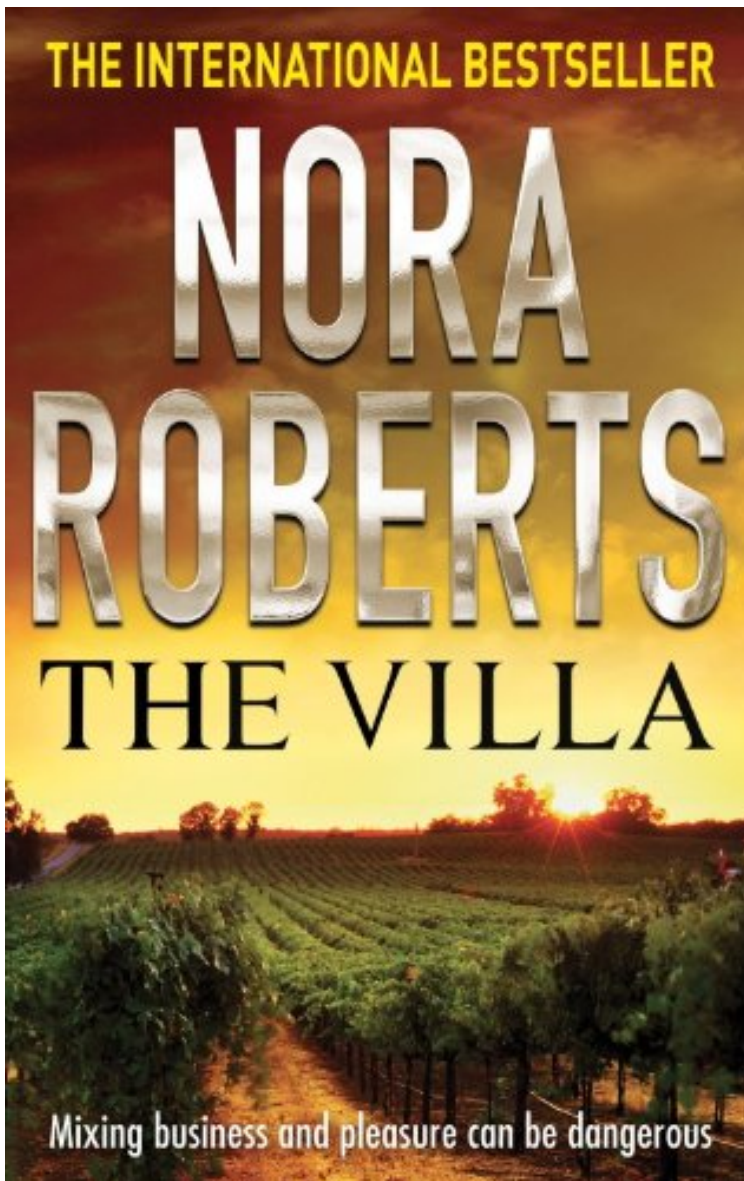


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The Villa (English Edition)



Par Nora Roberts
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Sophia is the pride of the Giambelli clan and a vital player in the family's celebrated winery. But things are about to change at Villa Giambelli. Family matriarch Tereza has announced a surprise merger with the MacMillan family's winery. As a savvy businesswoman, Sophia knows she must be ready for anything - but she isn't prepared for Tyler MacMillan. They've been ordered to work closely together to ensure the merger goes through smoothly. But as they toil together, both in and out of the fields, Sophia finds herself increasingly torn between professional rivalry and a powerful attraction. And when the business and the family are threatened by disturbing acts of sabotage, Sophia realises her quest isn't just for

dominance, but survival... 'Nora Roberts is a superstar' New York Times 'The most successful novelist on Planet Earth' Washington Post.com Set in beautiful Napa Valley, California, Nora Roberts's latest novel portrays a rich world of family-owned wineries, complete with enough romance, sophisticated business intrigue, betrayal, and murder to cow the Medicis of Florence. The Villa focuses on the merger of two prominent winemaking families, the Giambellis and MacMillans, and the incendiary combination of the two upcoming leaders of those dynasties, Sophia Giambelli and Tyler MacMillan. Tyler is the manager of the MacMillan vines and the distilling process, a job that suits his frank and no-frills personality. Creative and flashy, Sophia is head of Giambelli's public relations, and her job has been to put the best spin on whatever her family business produces--hard to do when the merger requires that she and Tyler switch jobs, and particularly hard to do when her own heart seems to spin out of control whenever they're together. Soon after the merger goes through, Tyler and Sophia learn that they have bigger problems than their conflicting work styles. Tony Avano, a Giambelli executive and Sophia's father, is murdered, and threats surface against the Giambelli women. As a quiet woman, Sophia's mother, Pilar, has made few enemies, except for Tony's new wife, Rene. The matriarch of the family--known simply as La Signora--may have knocked some rivals aside as she clawed her way to the top, but few would have reason to threaten her now. When poison is discovered in Giambelli wine, Sophia and Tyler learn the killer is much closer than they thought. In description, dialogue, and plot, Roberts's talent and control are as fine as ever. But while the relationship between Pilar and David, the new COO, feels complex and mature, Sophia and Tyler's romance can at times feel slightly forced. As Roberts explains repeatedly, Sophia approaches sex "as a man does," which apparently means with no strings attached. And while that does tend to take the "romance" out of the romance to some extent, the positive aspects to be found in *The Villa* outweigh this flaw, ensuring another hit for the talented and prolific Roberts. --Nancy R.E. O'Brien Extrait Prologue

On the night he was murdered, Bernardo Baptista dined simply on bread and cheese and a bottle of Chianti. The wine was a bit young, and Bernardo was not. Neither would continue to age. Like his bread and cheese, Bernardo was a simple man. He had lived in the same little house in the gentle hills north of Venice since his marriage fifty-one years before. His five children had been raised there. His wife had died there. Now at seventy-three, Bernardo lived alone, with most of his family a stone's throw away, at the edges of the grand Giambelli vineyard where he had worked since his youth. He had known La Signora since her girlhood, and had been taught to remove his cap whenever she passed by. Even now if Tereza Giambelli traveled from California back to the castello and vineyard, she would stop if she saw him. And they would talk of the old days when her grandfather and his had worked the vines. Signore Baptista, she called him. Respectfully. He had great appreciation for La Signora, and had been loyal to her and hers the whole of his life. For more than sixty years he had taken part in the making of Giambelli wine. There had been many changes, some good, in Bernardo's opinion, some not so good. He had seen much. Some thought, too much. The vines, lulled into dormancy by winter, would soon be pruned. Arthritis prevented him from doing much of the hard work, as he once had, but still he would go out every morning to watch his sons and grandsons carry on the tradition. A Baptista had always worked for Giambelli. And in Bernardo's mind, always would. On this last night of his seventy-three years, he looked out over the vines, his vines, seeing what had been done, what needed to be done, and listened as the December wind whistled through the bones of the grape. From the window where that wind tried to sneak, he could see the skeletons as they made their steady climb up the rises. They would take on flesh and life with time, and not wither as a man did. Such was the miracle of the grape. He could see the shadows and shapes of the great castello which ruled those vines, and ruled those who tended them. It was lonely now, in the night, in the winter, when only servants slept in the castello and the grapes had yet to be born. He wanted the spring, and the long summer that followed it when the sun would warm his innards and ripen the young fruit. He wanted, as it seemed he always had, one more harvest. Bernardo ached with the cold, deep in the bones. He considered heating some of the soup his granddaughter had brought to him, but his Annamaria was not the best of cooks. With this in mind, he made due with the cheese and sipped the good, full-bodied wine by his little fire. He was proud of his life's work, some of which was in the glass that caught the firelight and gleamed deep, deep red. The wine had been a gift of many given to him on his retirement. Though everyone knew the retirement was only a technicality. Even with his aching bones and a heart that had grown weak, Bernardo would walk the vineyard, test the grapes, watch the sky and smell the air. He lived for wine. He died for it. He drank, nodding by the fire, with a blanket tucked around his thin legs. Through his mind ran images of sun-washed fields, of his wife laughing, of himself showing his son how to support a young vine, to prune a mature one. Of La Signora standing beside him between the rows their grandfathers

had tended. Signore Baptista, she said to him when their faces were still young, we have been given a world. We must protect it. And so they had. The wind whistled at the windows of his little house. The fire died to embers. And when the pain reached out like a fist, squeezing his heart to death, his killer was six thousand miles away, surrounded by friends and associates, enjoying a perfectly poached salmon, and a fine Pinot Blanc.

Chapter Two

The valley, and the hills that rose from it, wore a thin coat of snow. Vines, arrogant and often temperamental soldiers, climbed up the slopes, their naked branches spearing through the quiet mist that turned the circling mountains to soft shadows. Under the pearly dawn, the vineyard shivered and slept. This peaceful scene had helped spawn a fortune, a fortune that would be gambled again, season after season. With nature both partner and foe. To Sophia, the making of wine was an art, a business, a science. But it was also the biggest game in town. From her window of her grandmother's villa, she studied the playing field. It was pruning season, and she imagined while she'd been traveling, vines had already been accessed, considered, and those first stages toward next year's harvest begun. She was glad she'd been called back, so that she could see that part of it for herself. When she was away, the business of the wine occupied all her energies. She rarely thought of the vineyard when she wore her corporate hat. And whenever she came back, like this, she thought of little else. Still, she couldn't stay long. She had duties in San Francisco. A new advertising campaign to be polished. The Giambelli centennial was just getting off the ground. And with the success of the auction in New York, the next stages would require her attention. An old wine for a new millennium, she thought. Villa Giombelli: The next century of excellence begins. But they needed something fresh, something savvy for the younger market. Those who bought their wine on the run a quick, impulse grab to take to a party. Well, she'd think of it. It was her job to think of it. And putting her mind to it would keep it off her father and the scheming Rene. None of her business, Sophia reminded herself. None of her business at all if her father wanted to hook himself up with a former underwear model with a heart the size and texture of a raisin. He'd made a fool of himself before, and no doubt would again. She wished she could hate him for it, for his pathetic weakness of character, and his benign neglect of his daughter. But the steady, abiding love just wouldn't shift aside. Which made her, she supposed, as foolish as her mother. He didn't care for either of them as much as he did the cut of his suit. And didn't give them a thought two minutes after they were out of his sight. He was a bastard, utterly selfish, sporadically affectionate and always careless. And that, she supposed, was part of his charm. She wished she hadn't stopped by the night before, wished she wasn't compelled to keep that connection between them no matter what he did or didn't do. Better, she thought, to keep on the move as she had for the past several years. Traveling, working, filling her time and her life with professional and social obligations. Two days, she decided. She would give her grandmother two days, spend time with her family, spend time in the vineyard and the winery. Then it was back to work with a vengeance. The new campaign would be the best in the industry. She would make sure of it. As she scanned the hills, she saw two figures walking through the mist. The tall gangly man with an old brown cap on his head. The ram-rod straight woman in mannish boots and trousers with hair white as the snow they trod. A border collie plodded along between them. Her grandparents, taking their morning walk with the aging and endlessly faithful Sally. The sight of them lifted her mood. Whatever changed in her life, whatever adjustments had been made, this was a constant. La Signora and Eli MacMillan. And the vines. She dashed from the window to grab her coat and join them. At sixty-seven, Tereza Giombelli was sculpted, razor sharp, body and mind. She had learned the art of the vine at her grandfather's knee. Had traveled with her father to California when she'd been only three to turn the land of the ripe valley to wine. She'd become bilingual, and had traveled back and forth between California and Italy the way other young girls had traveled to the playground. She'd learned to love the mountains, the thatch of forest, the rhythm of American voices. It was not home, would never be home as the castello was. But she had made her place here, and was content with it. She had married a man who had met her family's approval, and had learned to love him as well. With him she had made a daughter, and to her lasting grief, birthed two stillborn sons. She had buried her husband when she'd been only thirty. And had never taken his name nor given it to her only child. She was Giambelli, and that heritage, that responsibility was more vital and more sacred even than marriage. She had a brother she loved who was a priest and tended his flock in Venice. She had another who had died a soldier before he had really lived. She revered his memory, though it was dim. And she had a sister she considered foolish at best, who had brought a daughter more foolish yet into the world. It had been up to her to continue the family line, the family art. She had done so. Her marriage to Eli MacMillan had been carefully considered, scrupulously planned. She had considered it a merger as his vineyards were prime and nestled below hers in the valley. He was a good man, and more importantly in her calculations, a good vintner. He had cared for

her, but other men had cared for her. She enjoyed his company, but she had enjoyed the company of others.

In the end, she'd thought of him as the Merlot, the softer mellowing juice blended to her stronger, and admittedly harsher, Cabernet Sauvignon. The right combination could produce excellent results. Her acceptance of his marriage proposal had been contingent on complex and detailed business arrangements. The arrangements had benefited both their companies, and had contented her. But Tereza, who was rarely surprised, had been so, to find comfort, pleasure and simple satisfaction in a marriage now approaching its twentieth year. He was a fine-looking man still. Tereza didn't discount such matters as they spoke of genes. What made up a man was as important, to her mind, as what that man made of himself. Though he was ten years her senior, she saw no sign of him bowing to age. He still rose at dawn every day, and would walk with her, regardless of the weather, every morning. She trusted him as she had no man since her grandfather, and cared for him more than she had any man not of her blood. He knew all of her plans, and most of her secrets. "Sophia arrived late last night." "Ah." Eli laid a hand on her shoulder as they walked between the rows. It was a simple gesture, and habitual for him. It had taken Tereza some time to grow used to this casual touching from a man, from a husband. A longer time still to come to depend on it. "Did you think she wouldn't come?" "I knew she would come." Tereza was too used to being obeyed to doubt it. "If she'd come straight from New York, she would have been here sooner." "So, she had a date. Or did some shopping." Tereza's eyes narrowed. They were nearly black and still sharp in distance vision. Her voice was sharp as well, and carried the exotic music of her homeland. "Or stopped off to see her father." "Or stopped off to see her father," Eli agreed in his slow, comfortable way. "Loyalty's a trait you've always admired, Tereza." "When it's earned." There were times, much as she cared for him, when Eli's unending tolerance infuriated her. "Anthony Avano has earned nothing but disgust." "A pitiful man, a poor husband, and a mediocre father." Which made him, Eli mused, very like his own son. "Yet he continues to work for you." "I let him into Giambelli too intimately in those early years." She'd trusted him, she thought, had seen potential in him. Had been deceived by him. That she would never forgive. "Still, he knows how to sell. I use whatever tools perform their task. Firing him long ago would have been a personal satisfaction and professionally unwise. What's best for Giambelli is what's best. But I don't like to see my granddaughter cater to the man. Uh." She tossed aside thoughts of her son-in-law with an impatient wave of the hand. "We'll see how he takes what I have to say today. Sophia will have told him I called her home. So, he'll come." Eli stopped, turned. "And that's exactly as you wanted it. You knew she'd tell him." Her dark eyes glinted, and her smile was cool. "And if I did?" "You're a difficult woman, Tereza." "Yes. Thank you." He laughed, and shaking his head began to walk with her again. "Your announcements today are going to cause trouble. Resentment." "I should hope so." She stopped to examine some of the younger vines supported by trellis wires. Cane-pruning would be required here, she thought. Only the strongest of them would be permitted to grow and to be trained. "Complacency becomes rot, Eli. Tradition must be respected, and change explored." She scanned the land. The mist was raw and the air damp. The sun would not burn through it that day, she was certain. Winters, she thought, grew longer with every year. "Some of these vines I planted with my own hands," she continued. "Vines my father brought from Italy. As they grew old, the new was made from them. The new must always have room to sink their roots, Eli, and the mature are entitled to their respect. What I built here, what we've built in our time together, is ours. I'll do as I think best with it, and for it." "You always have. In this case, as in most, I agree with you. It doesn't mean we'll have an easy season ahead of us." "But a vintage one," she said. "This year. She reached over to turn a naked vine in her fingers. "A fine and rare vintage. I know it." She turned, watched her granddaughter run up the slope toward them. "She's so beautiful, Eli." "Yes. And strong." "She'll need to be," Tereza said and stepped forward to catch Sophia's hands in hers. "Buon giorno, cara. Come va?" "Bene. Bene." They kissed cheeks, hands tightly linked. "Nonna." Sophia eased back, studied her grandmother's face. It was a handsome face, not soft and pretty as the girl on the label made so long ago, but strong, nearly fierce. Carved, Sophia always thought, as much by ambition as time. "You look wonderful. And you." She shifted to throw her arms around Eli. Here, it was all very simple. He was Eli, just Eli, the only grandfather she'd ever known. Safe, loving, and uncomplicated. He gave her a little lift with the hug, so her toes just left the ground. It made her laugh, and cling. "I saw you from my window." She stepped back as her feet hit the ground again, then lowered to pat and stroke the patient Sally. "You're a painting, the three of you. The Vineyard, I'd call it," she continued, straightening to button Eli's jacket at his throat against the chill. "What a morning." She closed her eyes, tipping her head back and breathing deep. She could smell the damp, her grandmother's soap, and the tobacco Eli must have secreted in one of his pockets. "Your trip was successful?" Tereza asked. "I have

memos. My memos have memos," she added, laughing again as she hooked her arms through theirs so they could walk together. "You'll be pleased, Nonna. And I have some brilliant ideas, she says with due modesty, on the promotion campaign." Eli glanced over, and when he saw Tereza wasn't going to comment, patted Sophia's hand. The trouble, he thought, would start very quickly now. "The pruning's begun." Sophia noted the fresh cuts on the vines. "At MacMillan as well?" "Yes. It's time." "It seems a long way till harvest. Nonna, will you tell me why you've brought us all here? You know I love to see you, and Eli, and Mama. But preparing the vines isn't the only work that's required for Giambelli." "We'll talk later. Now, we'll have breakfast before those monsters of Donato's are up and driving us all insane." "Nonna." "Later," Tereza said again. "We're not all yet here." Villa Giambelli sat on a knoll above the center of the valley and beside a forest that had been left to grow wild. Its stones showed gold and red and umber when the light struck them, and its windows were many. The winery had been built to replicate the one in Italy, and though it had been expanded, and ruthlessly modernized, it was still in operation. A large, attractively outfitted tasting room where patrons could, by appointment, sample the products along with breads and cheeses had been added to it. Wine clubs were welcomed to lavish affairs four times a year, and tours could be arranged through the offices there or in San Francisco. Wine, bought from the winery itself on those occasions, could be shipped anywhere in the world. The caves, with their cool, damp air that pocketed the hills were used for storage and the aging of the wine. The fields that had built Villa Giambelli and its facilities stretched for more than a hundred acres, and during harvest the very air smelled of the promise of wine. The central courtyard of the villa was tiled in chianti red and boasted a fountain where a grinning Bacchus forever hoisted his goblet. When the winter cold had passed, dozens and dozens of pots would be set out so that the space was alive with flower and scent. It boasted twelve bedrooms and fifteen baths, a solarium, a ballroom and a formal dining room that could accommodate sixty. There were rooms dedicated to music, and rooms celebrating books. Rooms for work, and for contemplation. Within its walls was a collection of Italian and American art and antiques that was second to none. There were both indoor and outdoor pools, and a twenty car garage. Its gardens were a fantasy. Balconies and terraces laced the stone, and a series of steps afforded both family and guests private entrances and exits. Despite its size, its scope and its priceless treasures, it was very much a home. The first time Tyler had seen it, he'd thought of it as a castle, full of enormous rooms and complicated passages. At the moment, he thought of it as a prison, where he was sentenced to spend entirely too much time with entirely too many people. He wanted to be outside, in the raw air tending his vines and drinking strong coffee out of a Thermos. Instead he was trapped in the family parlor sipping an excellent chardonnay. A fire was snapping gaily in the hearth, and elegant little hors d'oeuvres were set around the room on platters of colorful Italian pottery. He couldn't understand why people wasted the time and effort on bits of finger food when slapping a sandwich together was so much quicker and easier. Why was it food had to be such a damn event? And he imagined if he uttered such heresy in a household of Italians, he'd be lynched on the spot. He'd been forced to change out of his work clothes into slacks and a sweater his idea of formal wear. At least he hadn't strapped himself into a suit like what was the guy's name? Don. Don from Venice with the wife who wore too much makeup, too much jewelry and always seemed to have a shrieking baby attached to some part of her body. She talked too much, and no one, particularly her husband, appeared to pay any attention. Francesca Giambelli Russo said little to nothing. Such a contrast to La Signora, Ty mused. You'd never make them as aunt and niece. She was thin and drifty, an insubstantial little woman who stayed glued in her chair and looked as though she'd jump out of her skin if anyone addressed her directly. Ty was always careful not to do so. The little boy if you could call a demon from hell a boy was sprawled on the rug smashing two trucks together. Eli's border collie, Sally, was hiding under Sophia's legs. Great legs, Ty noted absently. She was looking as sleek and polished as ever, like something lifted off a movie screen and dropped down in three dimensions. She appeared to be fascinated by whatever Don was saying to her, and kept those big, dark chocolate eyes of hers on his face. But Ty watched as she discreetly slipped Sally hors d'oeuvres. The move was too slick and calculated for her to have had her full attention on the conversation. "Here. The stuffed olives are excellent." Pilar stepped up beside him with a small plate. "Thanks." Tyler shifted. Of all the Giambellis, Tyler was most comfortable with Pilar. She never expected him to make endless, empty conversation just for the sake of hearing her own voice. "Any idea when we're going to get this business rolling?" "When Mama's ready, and not before. My sources tell me lunch is set for fourteen, but I can't pin down who we're waiting for. Whoever it is, and whatever this is about, Eli seems content. That's a good sign." He started to grunt, remembered his manners. "Let's hope so." "We haven't seen you around here in weeks been busy," she said even as he uttered the words, then she laughed. "Naturally.

What are you up to, other than business?" "What else is there?" With a shake of her head, she pressed the olives on him again. "You're more like my mother than any of us. Weren't you seeing someone last summer?"

A pretty blonde? Pat, Patty?" "Patsy. Not really seeing. Just sort of" He made a vague gesture. "You know." "Honey, you need to get out more. And not just for you know." It was such a mother thing to say, he had to smile. "I could say the same about you." "Oh, I'm just an old stick-in-the-mud." "Best looking stick in the room," he countered and made her laugh again. "You always were sweet when you put your mind to it." And the comment, even from a man she considered a kind of surrogate son, boosted the spirits that seemed to flag all too easily these days. "Mama, you're hoarding the olives." Sophia dashed up, plucked one off the plate. Beside her lovely, composed mother, she was a fireball, crackling with electricity. The kind that was always giving you hot, unexpected jolts if you got too close. Or so it always seemed to Ty. For that single reason, he'd always tried to keep a safe and comfortable distance. "Quick talk to me. Were you just going to leave me trapped with Don the Dull forever?" Sophia muttered. "Poor Sophie. Well, think of it this way. It's probably the first time in weeks he's been able to say five words at the same time without Gina interrupting him." "Believe me, he made up for it." She rolled her dark, exotic eyes. "So, Ty, how are you?" "Fine." "Hard at work for MacMillan?" "Sure." "Know any words with more than one syllable?" "Some. Thought you were in New York." "Was," she said, mimicking his tone as her lips twitched. "Now, I'm here." She glanced over her shoulder as her two young cousins began to shriek and sob. "Mama, if I was ever that obnoxious, how did you stop yourself from drowning me in the fountain?" "You weren't obnoxious, sweetie. Demanding, arrogant, temperamental, but never obnoxious. Excuse me." She handed the plate to Sophia and went to do what she'd always done best. Make peace. "I suppose I should have done that," Sophia said with a sigh as she watched her mother scoop up the miserable young girl. "But I've never seen a pair of kids less appealing in my life." "Comes from being spoiled and neglected." "At the same time?" She considered, studied Don ignoring his screaming son, and Gina making foolish cooing noises to him. "Good call," she decided. Then because they weren't her problem thank Jesus she turned her attention back to Tyler. He was such a man, she decided. He looked like something carved out of the Vacas that guarded the valley. And, he was certainly more pleasant to contemplate than the four-year-old temper tantrum behind her. Now if she could just pry a reasonable conversation out of him, she could be nicely occupied until lunch was served. "Any clues about the theme of our little gathering today?" Sophia asked. "No." "Would you tell me if you did?" He shrugged a shoulder and watched Pilar murmur to little Tereza as she carried her to the side window. She looked natural, he thought. Madonna-like, he supposed was the suitable phrase. And because of it, the irritable, angry child took on an attractive, appealing look. "Why do you suppose people have kids when they're not going to pay any real attention to them?" Sophia started to speak, then broke off as her father and Rene walked into the room. "That's a good question," she murmured, and taking the glass from his hand, finished off his wine. "Damn good question." At the window, Pilar tensed, and all the simple pleasure she'd gotten from distracting the unhappy little girl drained away. She felt instantly frumpy, unattractive, old, fat, sour. Here was the man who had discarded her. And here was the latest in the long line of replacements. Younger, lovelier, smarter, sexier. But because she knew her mother would not, she set the child on the floor and walked over to greet them. Her smile was warm and easy and graced a face much more compelling than she thought. Her simple slacks and sweater were more elegant, more feminine than Rene's slick power suit. And her manner carried an innate class that held more true sparkle than diamonds. "Tony, how good you could make it. Hello, Rene." "Pilar." Rene smiled slowly and trailed a hand down Tony's arm. The diamond on her finger caught the light. She waited a beat, to be certain Pilar saw it, registered the meaning. "You look rested." "Thank you." The backs of her knees dissolved. She could feel the support going out from under her as completely as if Rene had rammed the toe of her hot red pumps into them. "Please, come in, sit. What can I get you to drink?" "Don't fuss, Pilar." Tony waved her off, even as he leaned down to give her an absent peck on the cheek. "We'll just go say hello to Tereza." "Go to your mom," Ty said under his breath. "What?" "Go, make an excuse, and get your mom out of here." She saw it then, the diamond glint on Rene's finger, the blank shock in her mother's eyes. She shoved the plate at Ty and strode across the room. "Mama, can you help me with something for a minute?" "Yes, just let me." "It'll only take a second," Sophia continued, quickly pulling Pilar from the room. She just kept moving until they were well down the hall and into the two level library. There, she pulled the pocket doors closed behind her, leaned back against them. "Mama. I'm so sorry." "Oh." Trying to laugh, Pilar ran an unsteady hand over her face. "So much for thinking I pulled that off." "You did beautifully." Sophia hurried over as Pilar lowered to the arm of a chair. "But I know that face." She cupped her mother's in her hands. "Apparently so does Tyler. The ring's

ostentatious and obvious, just like she is." "Oh, baby." Her laugh was strained, but she tried. "It's stunning, gorgeous just like she is. It's all right." But already she was turning the gold band she continued to wear around and around her finger. "Really, it's all right." "The hell it is. I hate her. I hate both of them, and I'm going back in there and telling them right now." "You're not." Pilar got up, gripped Sophia's arms. Did the pain she see in her daughter's eyes show as clearly in her own? And was that her fault? Had this endless limbo she'd lived in dragged her daughter into the void? "It solves nothing, changes nothing. There's no point in hate, Sophie. It'll only damage you." "No, Sophia thought. No. It could forge you. "Be angry!" she demanded. "Be furious and bitter and crazed." Be anything, she thought. Anything but hurt and defeated. I can't bear it. "You do it, baby." She ran her hands soothingly up and down Sophia's arms. "So much better than I could." "To walk in here this way. To just walk in and shove it in our faces. He had no right to do that to you, Mama, or to me." "He has a right to do what he wants. But it was poorly done." Excuses, she admitted. She'd spent nearly thirty years making excuses for Anthony Avano. A hard habit to break. "Don't let it hurt you. He's still your father. Whatever happens, he always will be." "He was never a father to me." Pilar paled. "Oh, Sophia." "No. No." Furious with herself, Sophia held up a hand. "I am obnoxious. This isn't about me, but I just can't help making it about me. It's not even about him," she said winding down. "He's oblivious. But she's not. She knew what she was doing. How she wanted to do it. And I hate her coming in to our home and lording that over you, damn it, over us. All of us." "You're ignoring one factor, baby. Rene may love him." "Oh, please." "So cynical. I loved him, why shouldn't she?" Sophia whirled away. She wanted to kick something, to break something. And to take the jagged shards of it and swipe them over Rene's perfect California face. "She loves his money, his position and his goddamn expense account." "Probably. But he's the kind of man who makes women love him effortlessly." Sophia caught the wistfulness in her mother's voice. She'd never loved a man, but she recognized the sound of a woman who had. Who did. And that, the hopelessness of that, emptied her of temper. "You haven't stopped loving him." "If I haven't, I'd better. Promise me one thing? Don't cause a scene." "I hate to give up the satisfaction, but I suppose chilly disinterest will have more impact. One way or the other, I want to knock that smug look off her face." She walked back, kissed both her mother's cheeks, then hugged her. Here she could, and did, love without shadows and smudges. "Will you be all right, Mama?" "Yes. My life doesn't change, does it?" Oh, and the thought of that was damning. "Nothing really changes. Let's go back." "I'll tell you what we're going to do," Sophia began when they were in the hall again. "I'm going to juggle my schedule and clear a couple of days. Then you and I are going to the spa. We're going to sink up to our necks in mud, have facials, get our bodies scrubbed, rubbed and polished. We'll spend wads of money on over-priced beauty products we'll never use and lounge around in bathrobes all day." The door of the powder room opened as they walked by, and a middle-aged brunette stepped out. "Now that sounds wonderfully appealing. When do we leave?" "Helen." Pilar pressed a hand to her heart even as she leaned in to kiss her friend's cheek. "You scared the life out of me." "Sorry. Had to make the dash for the john." She tugged at the skirt of her stone gray suit over hips she was constantly trying to whittle, to make certain it was back in place. "All that coffee I drank on the way up. Sophia, aren't you gorgeous? So" She shifted her briefcase, squared her shoulders. "The usual suspects in the parlor?" "More or less. I didn't realize she meant you when Mama said the lawyers would be coming." And, Sophia thought, if her grandmother had called in Judge Helen Moore, it meant serious business. "Because Pilar didn't know either, nor did I until a few days ago. Your grandmother insisted I handle this business, personally." Helen's shrewd gray eyes shifted toward the parlor. She'd been involved, one way or the other, with the Giambellis and their business for nearly forty years. They never failed to fascinate her. "She keeping all of you in the dark?" "Apparently," Pilar murmured. "Helen, she's all right, isn't she? I took this latest business about changing her will and so on as part of this phase she's been in this past year, since Signore Baptista died." "As far as I know, health-wise, La Signora is as hale as ever." Helen adjusted her black-rimmed glasses, gave her oldest friend a bolstering smile. "As her attorney, I can't tell you any more about her motivations, Pilar. Even if I completely understood them. It's her show. Why don't we see if she's ready for the curtain?" Reprinted from *The Villa* by Nora Roberts by permission of Jove, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright 2002, Nora Roberts. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.