



The Dark Castle Lords present

Knight's Desire

Jannine Corti Petska

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

The term *uccellino* translates to “little bird.” However, in parts of Italy, *uccello* means a male organ. A woman may refer to that part of a man’s anatomy as *uccellino* right after they have finished making love. In KNIGHT’S DESIRE, the word strictly means “little bird.”

(Thank you my friend, Omero Sabatini, for imparting with this knowledge.)

The process of Italy’s history was complicated. It was divided by 1) city-states in the north and central regions, 2) the Papal States across the middle, and 3) the kingdom of Naples/Sicily in the south. Although there were certain areas of Northern Italy where feudal traditions prevailed, there was no strong or enduring set of codes and traditions, like those found in feudal Northern Europe. Therefore, in practice, Italy did not follow so closely those various chivalric traditions, codes and formalities of knighthood as recorded in most of Europe.

(My gratitude to Eugene Marseglia for sharing his vast knowledge of Renaissance Italy.)

DEDICATION

For Ruby Kelsch, an amazing writer and a true friend. Your memory will live in my heart forever.

CHAPTER ONE

Piemonte, Italy

Summer 1336

The heavy iron gate shuttered upward. A cloud of grayish dust blew into the yard, billowing as high as the surrounding walls as the ground thundered and shook beneath the score of soldiers riding into the safety of Castello DiSanto.

Mariella Rizzoli hid behind a pine tree and watched in awe. She pulled her cloak tighter, only her eyes and hands visible as she crouched out of sight and prayed the spectacle of Baron Alberto DiSanto's returning son shielded her presence. The summer sun beat down relentlessly, though in the distant sky clouds formed. No doubt a summer rain would move into the region by nightfall.

The *cavaliere*—as a knight was called—at the fore sat erect upon his dressed horse, a position bearing his noble birthright. She had heard stories about Romano DiSanto's bravery in battle and his kindness toward the less fortunate. The two sides of the man bit at Mariella's curiosity. Yet she would never forgive him for his sire's evilness. If not for the elder baron, her father would have died peacefully, knowing she would have a place to call home for the rest of her life. Still, she knew she must get to the baron, reason with him for the right to her father's keep.

As the last horse cleared the entrance, Mariella prayed she'd make it through before the gate lowered. She moved quickly, using the shadow of the wall as her safe haven. She cast a look through the men on horseback until she found the baron just as he removed his helmet. His sweat-dampened hair fell about his shoulders. When he turned his head slightly, she couldn't look away from his strong profile, even though his jaw and chin were covered with hair. The last time she saw Romano DiSanto was 12 years ago when she was a girl of ten and he was going off to war in his eighteenth year.

Attention remained on the newly arrived baron, giving her a blessed opportunity to charge forward. But in her moment's distraction, the gatekeeper had already begun lowering the gate. She glanced up, determined to beat the iron spears descending toward the dirt. She pulled her clothing taut around her and dove across the line where the gate would land. Unfortunately, she skidded into the hind leg of a horse. The animal pranced nervously. Fearing it would trample her, Mariella screamed.

Lingering dust choked her throat and settled in her lungs. She curled into a defensive ball, thinking she might survive the weight of the horse. Before she could impart with another scream, she felt herself lifted off the ground and cradled into the strong arms of a man.

"You are safe now," she heard the man say, his voice grating yet comforting.

She lifted her head to find the troubled features of the *cavaliere* who had sat at the helm of the small army. Baron Romano DiSanto, his gray eyes filled with concern.

Mariella shifted, moving her legs so he'd set her down. When her feet touched the ground, she felt her world whirl around her.

"Are you all right, girl?" he asked.

"Sì," she managed while fighting the dizziness that overcame her.

"Are you a servant here?"

"Servant?" She tilted her head back to better view him. He stood more than a head and shoulders taller and was as formidable as the castle behind them. "Sì, I am, Cavaliere DiSanto," she said with unstable confidence, praying he'd not see through her lie. To have him believe she worked in his castle was the only way she'd get close enough to him to save her father's keep. "I was returning from...the *mercato*."

His eyebrows rose slowly, and he glanced down at her empty hands.

"I did not find what I needed," she replied to his unspoken query.

He shifted his gaze above her head and called out orders to his soldiers. They dispersed toward the inner ward's stables, taking his horse along. "What are your duties to me?"

Mariella swallowed hard. She had no idea how many servants were retained after the elder baron died. "I am newly hired."

"Your duties?" he posed again.

"I...see to...your chamber."

At first his eyes widened, but then they turned cool, steely. He did not believe her.

“When it was learned the baron’s son was returning, I helped ready your chamber.”

It was difficult to tell if he accepted her falsehood. He held his features in the precise manner as before, wary yet curious. She peered into his eyes again, wondering what ran through his mind, searching for a clue to those thoughts. Would he toss her out of the inner ward? What then? How else would she convince him to sign over the keep? She touched the bodice of her dress, relieved the document still rested there in safety.

“Then my chambermaid you are,” he said, startling her. “Follow me.”

“To where?” The instant the words left her mouth she wanted to stuff them back in. Never did a servant question her superior, especially a baron. “Your pardon, sir.”

“See that it never happens again, or you may find yourself turned out.”

* * *

War was hell on the body and soul. And the spirit, too. Romano thought he’d seen enough battles to numb his senses. Truth be told, it made him sick, tired and frustrated. The line between right and wrong caused needless loss of lives and muddled a man’s thoughts. But it made coming home all the more satisfying.

Stepping into his chamber, familiarity embraced him in its welcoming arms. He paused to thoroughly inspect the contents. He had almost forgotten what his bed looked like, the four carved posts seeming smaller now. A basin of water sat on a tall table, and a trunk across the room bore his initials. The simplicity of it all didn’t escape his notice, yet it was more comfort than he enjoyed these twelve years past.

He glanced back over his shoulder at the chambermaid standing in the hall. She seemed nervous, mayhap uncertain of her duties. She appeared young, and he wondered if she knew what her duties entailed. In truth, he was surprised to learn she was his personal servant. He had expected a boy to tend to him and do his bidding. With her hair free from its hood, he was unable to turn away from the shocking red braid curved over her shoulder, the wispy tips resting at her waist.

Romano frowned away his sudden twinge of desire. “Have you a name, girl?”

Her eyes snapped up to his. “Mari—” Her head dipped.

“Mari? Is that it?”

She turned her eyes up to his once again. “Mariella.”

Romano nodded. “Bring out the tub.” Assuming it was still in the connecting storage

room along with his armor and clothing and other items from his childhood. When he was younger, he'd hide in that room, his sanctuary from his overbearing father.

The girl hesitated.

"Know you where the tub is kept?" he posed, suddenly leery. He stepped toward her, and she hopped back in fright. "Bedamned, girl. Do you fear me?"

She shook her head. "As I have said, I am new here. I've not been told where your tub is located."

The sound of her sweet voice soothed his weary soul. He peered into her blue-green eyes, finding something there that told him he'd best mind his heart. He could lose himself in those eyes. Why he hadn't noticed them during their first encounter, he couldn't say. Perhaps it had been his concern for the girl's safety.

"Find Giorgio and send him up." His father's manservant was best suited to help him remove the traveling armor he wore and to help the girl drag the wood tub into his chamber.

* * *

With his armor removed, the baron looked no less impressive. He was solid and muscular. Mariella tried not to stare, but she simply could not look away. When he rotated his shoulders, no doubt to work out the stiffness from wearing heavy armor and sitting in one position atop a horse for long periods, she fixed her curiosity on his chest. The fabric of his tunic stretched to its limits, and she wondered if it would give, mayhap reveal his covered flesh.

A shiver raced down her spine. Never had she given free rein to thoughts of a man's body. The last six years she had cared for her ill father, making certain their keep was clean and habitable and that he was comfortable and free from bed sores. Only once did they discuss marriage. He worried she'd never find a man because she dedicated herself to caring for him. She wasn't concerned at all. Men, after all, didn't come courting her. Besides, she was much too old now to marry. What man wanted a woman years past marriageable age?

"Mariella!"

A little scream left her mouth. The baron knight frightened her, and his stance turned that fear into apprehension. She prayed he was not prone to disciplining his servants with beatings, as she had heard his father had done. Why hadn't she thought about that before impulsively putting her scheme into motion?

"Your pardon, *cavaliere*." A thought crossed her mind. "Would you prefer Baron?"

"I care not how you address me. However, I do care that my maidservant is already remiss in her duties." He jerked his head toward the connecting door. "Giorgio has gone for the tub. Fetch water. And make certain it is hot."

* * *

Thank the Lord Giorgio helped her carry buckets of heated water up the stairs. Although he had served the elder baron, clearly he had taken on the position for the younger baron as well. Portly and balding, Giorgio spoke little. She saw in his eyes he didn't trust her, although he never questioned how she came to be Baron DiSanto's maidservant.

As she carried the last buckets up the stairs, Mariella grimaced from the pain settling into her shoulders and back. Pausing for a moment, she took a deep breath to relieve the stinging in her muscles. It wasn't as if she had not executed this task before. She had done it countless times for her father. Three months had passed since he died and already her body turned soft, unprepared to carry wood pails laden with water.

"Best get to it else Baron DiSanto might turn me out. And I'll be no closer to retaining my father's keep. *My* keep, now."

"What are you mumbling about, girl?" Giorgio asked from the top of the stairs.

Mariella frowned but made certain she answered politely. "I am feeling the pain of carrying these buckets up the stairs. That is all."

"It is not your place to complain about such things. You are a servant, nothing more. Now, get on with it. The baron grows impatient."

Glaring at Giorgio's back when he turned toward the baron's door, she wished the man had left Castello DiSanto after the elder baron passed on. It would have made her quest easier. The manservant might be inclined to interfere should he discover her reason for wheedling her way into the baron's employ.

"Here is the last of the hot water," she said as she entered his chamber. "As soon as I --" Lord have mercy! The baron, settled into the tub, lounged back with his eyes closed, his broad shoulders stuffed between the wooden sides. Now what was she to do? How did she get around seeing him naked as she emptied the last two buckets?

"Approach, Mariella," the baron commanded, opening one eye to watch her.

"Your pardon, baron knight. I—"

"I find your virginal reaction charming. However, the longer you stand rooted to the stone, the faster the water will turn cold."

"But I—"

"Rest easy, girl. Look to the window as you pour the water."

Rest easy? She had never seen a man in all his naked splendor. Not even her father when she had bathed him. Lorenza, their widowed and only servant, had tended to such private matters.

I can do this, she said to herself. *I must, in the name of my father's keep.*

One foot in front of the other. Closer.

Mariella drew in a shaky breath as she stared at the window slit. Beside the tub, she set one bucket down, all the while studying the top curve of the window, the thickness of the walls, the color of the stone. She tipped the bucket.

"If you cannot look at me, how do you plan to bathe my body?"

Startled, Mariella emptied the water over the baron's head, dousing the floor as well as his face. He spit the water out with a curse.

"Blast it, girl! Have you never attended to anyone in your life?"

"Sì, cavaliere. But never a...a naked man."

Her heart pounded heavily in her chest, thundering up to her ears. She knew not what to do. When the baron knight yanked on her hand and brought her down to her knees, she held back a sudden spate of tears. He squeezed her chin between his wet fingers and forced her to look into his bemused eyes. Drenched hair clustered about his face, tentacles gripping his beard and mustache. His lips pinched tightly, turning white. She must diffuse the situation before his ire grew irrevocably.

"Your pardon, baron knight. I will not displease you again."

He held onto her longer, studying her features before he relaxed his hold and finally let go. "I doubt that."

"Truly."

"Then empty the last bucket and fetch the cloth to wash my back."

"Sì, cavaliere. Uh, baron knight."

He heaved a sigh. "Must you extend my titles? Since you are my personal servant, you may refer to me as my lord baron knight."

A small quirk at the corner of his mouth caught her notice. Was he mocking her? Or was he serious? Mariella nodded. "As you wish, my lord baron knight."

His burst of laughter distressed her. She knew not what to make of his temperament, which seemed unstable. Without another word, she looked across the room while she emptied the last bucket into the tub. After retrieving the cloth and soap Giorgio had placed on the stool next to the tub, Mariella drew up all her courage. She would need every ounce of it to bathe this man. He wasn't helpless by any means, but he was having himself a bit of entertainment at her expense. She'd wager her life on it.

* * *

Romano clenched his teeth as the girl wiped the cloth across his back. He felt her eyes bore into his flesh, heating him more than the warm water. What manner of idiot was he? There had been no shortage of women during his absence from Castello DiSanto. But none had he allowed to bathe him. So why did he request it of Mariella when he was more than capable of doing it for himself?

Forcing his thoughts away from the girl, he turned insightful, feeling as if he'd taken God's gifts for granted. He returned to the *castello* solely because of his father's death. Not because he came home to grieve. His sire did naught to deserve a son's grief. There was more to accomplish, a sense of belonging, mayhap to settle down permanently and find a wife.

Romano chided himself in silence. What did he know about marriage and family? His mother died not long after his birth, and his father blamed him. Alberto DiSanto did not immediately take another wife. He preferred to wallow in his loss, to take out his grief on his only child. And when Alberto discovered Romano's secret, the elder baron beat him until blood covered Romano's young body.

"My lord baron knight?"

The soft voice calling to him should have relieved his revived tension on the subject of his sire. It didn't, but Romano did release the thoughts provoking his seldom lost ire. It was his generally calm nature that won battles...and respect among his men and the sovereigns he'd fought for and against.

"Are you ill?" she inquired. "Should I fetch Giorgio?"

The genuine concern in her voice baffled Romano. After all, they were virtually strangers. "I am not ill." He turned his upper body to look at her. "I think my back is quite clean. If you scrub it any further, I fear you'll scrub the flesh off." He curled his fingers around her upper arm and moved her to the side of the tub. "There are other parts of me that need a good cleansing."

His mind included.

She blushed.

Romano chuckled as he studied her features. Her nose was straight yet suited to her face and softened the high set of her cheekbones. Her abundance of hair appeared destined to flee the constraints of the braid. What would it do to him to see that beautiful red fanned out over his pillows?

His groin tingled, alerting him to the awakening of his dormant desire. He'd been without a woman for months, by his own choosing, while his thoughts had tossed about ideas of going home. Those thoughts came long before he'd been summoned about his father's death. He'd been conflicted since the beginning of the year while his restless soul battled his mind. Only time would see which won out. Would he stay? Or would he return to the soldier's life, the only life he'd really known?

Without thinking, Romano brushed the back of his fingers across Mariella's cheek. So soft, so precious. The woman was petite, but that didn't bother him. He had no preference in a woman, so long as she was clean and neat. But this woman, whom he had first thought was quite young, stirred him in a strange way. He'd not deny that he wouldn't mind bedding her, for it wasn't solely lust he felt. Yet he knew it would be wrong to become that familiar with his personal servant.

"*Gesu*," he muttered. He didn't want to think at all. He willed his mind into a void, but staring at the face of a beauty outlawed his will. Leaning forward, he curved his hand behind her head and brought her lips to his.

The door opened then, and a woman's scornful voice filled the chamber.

"So it's true. You have returned."

CHAPTER TWO

Romano snatched up the towel from a nearby stool and covered his privates as he stood and faced the audacious woman.

"You overstep your boundaries," he said, surveying her wispy body and ordinary face. The iniquitous way she stared at his bare chest disgusted him. "Leave at once."

"We shall speak after you are—" she scanned his entire body, "—properly attired."

"We shall speak *when* I am properly rested."

Giorgio had warned him about Agora, his father's young bride. She appeared about his age, although her face was ghostly pale and her hazel eyes calculating. She claimed her four-year-old son was sired by the elder baron. Romano was leery about the validity of her claim the instant he heard of it.

"Leave at once, or I shall throw you out of my chamber. Indeed, out of my castle!"

Her mouth pinched in. Without another word, she turned to leave, but not before glaring at something at his side. Romano glanced down to find Mariella peeking around his leg. All this time, he had presented the wench with a perfect view of his naked backside. More than embarrassment from Agora finding them in a compromising situation heightened the color of her cheeks. And while he found it a comely sight, he was actually grateful Agora had interrupted what he was about to do.

Alone with Mariella, he wrapped the towel around his hips and stepped from the tub. Still kneeling beside the tub, she turned her inquisitive gaze up to him. How he'd love to climb back into the soothing water and take her along. Undressed, of course.

The surging rise of his desire pitched him into a foul mood. "Leave," he ordered, though not harshly. Pray she abided him, else he might make good his urge to lose himself in Mariella's pleasing body.

* * *

Rising from the pallet beside the low-burning fire in the hearth, Mariella stretched the muscles in her back and arms. The chill of the past night would abate by mid-morning, replaced by a warm summer day. Rain did not fall last eve, as she had thought it would. The only sound in the baron knight's chamber was his slumbering breaths. She had lain awake half the night listening, wondering how lying beside him would feel.

Mariella felt herself blush. She didn't deny the beauty of his body. Lord, she couldn't help but inspect the back of his solid thighs the day before when his stepmother barged into his chamber. Neither could she stop herself from looking up at his— She gulped. His buttocks was tight, small. How disgraceful of her to think about the anatomy of a man. Of the lord knight.

The object of her shameful thoughts stirred and moaned indecently. He gripped the bedcovers between his legs and crushed his pillow within his arms. When he stirred again, Mariella smoothed the hair away from her face. She had overslept and now she must tend to the knight. Her own ablutions would have to wait. Hurriedly pulling on her shoes, she set about tidying up the covers on her pallet. By then, the knight was sitting up in bed.

Their eyes met. He was much too appealing upon waking. His golden-brown hair mussed, his eyes bright yet alluring, his body undoubtedly warm. Mariella shivered.

"You may stoke the fire," he said, assuming she was cold. What would he say if he knew how her body reacted wantonly at the sight of him? Lord, just the mere thought warmed her cheeks.

"Thank you, my lord baron knight. I am not cold." Perhaps she misread his intent. "Unless you are, I will then—"

"No. I am quite warm." A strange expression crossed his face. "Go down and alert the cook that I am ravenous."

Something about the way he said *ravenous* skittered through her stomach. She had the feeling his appetite wasn't solely for food.

"Shall I lay out your clothes?"

"I will see to my clothes."

Mariella nodded. Thank the Lord he didn't ask her to dress him.

* * *

Romano sat on the window ledge and bit into a chunk of cheese-laced bread, his gaze intent upon Mariella as she straightened his bed. What was it about her that struck a cord of familiarity in his mind? Albeit the recesses of his mind, but he would swear on his mother's soul he knew Mariella from somewhere.

She flitted about like a delicate bird preparing her nest. Now and again, she'd glance up and her cheeks instantly flushed. He read it in her thoughts. She was reliving their indiscretion of the day before. While the heightened color in her cheeks gave him a chuckle, the awareness in his loins did not, and he dropped a hand down to hide the evidence of his arousal.

"How came you to Castello DiSanto?" he inquired, startling her.

"My lord baron knight?"

"Come now, Mariella. I would think you are hiding something if you do not answer my question."

She frowned ever so slightly. "I was turned out when my...employer died."

"Who was he?"

She floundered for a response, he could tell. "Not a man of means, to be sure. He was just an ordinary man."

Her hand smoothed the wrinkles in the coverlet. Romano followed her fingers, wishing his body was beneath their roving touch. He cleared his throat, at the same time trying to clear his mind.

Her employer dressed his servants well, for she wore the clothes of a woman with some means. Perhaps not wealthy, but not poor, either. "Was this man your father? Mayhap your husband?"

"I have never been married."

Evading his query. She *did* have something to hide. "Have you ever been with a man?"

She shot upright, her body stiff and her features high and wide. Clearly, his bold inquiry shocked her. "You are my lord, but if I choose not to answer, will you turn me out?"

"That depends, Mariella." He slipped off the ledge and tossed his bread to the tray at his feet. When he started toward her, she looked as if she'd turn into that delicate bird she reminded him of and fly away. "Are you here at the bidding of an enemy?"

"I know not what you mean. I have never been outside the walls of our fair town."

"Enemies can be found in any town." He paused at the foot of the bed. "If you were sent by an enemy, I will not turn you out."

She appeared ill-at-ease.

"I will see you punished instead. By unpleasant means. Mayhap your life will not be spared."

“All right! I was not sent by an enemy. Faith, I have only two days past learned you were returning. And *sì*, my father passed on and I am without a home. A notice was posted in the *mercato* that Castello DiSanto was hiring for your return.”

Staring at her, Romano noticed the little quirk beside her left eye he hadn't seen before. Perhaps it meant she was lying. There was only one way to find out. If she was a virgin, as she alluded to, she'd not allow him to kiss her without protest. And if she was here to harm him, she'd use her body to weaken his defenses. He overpowered her lips in a kiss some would construe as boorish. He cared not, for most important was his safety and peace of mind.

To his surprise, she did protest, but not enough to convince him she had told the truth. Just a moment later, she gave in to his kiss, responding as tentative as a virgin would, yet making him burn for more. What was he to believe? He couldn't think rationally, not when his body ached to feel her flesh rubbing against his.

Romano broke away, stepping back and staring at her red-tinged cheeks and inflamed lips. “Fetch Giorgio,” he commanded gruffly.

* * *

Lord have mercy! What was she thinking? Giving in to Baron DiSanto like she did. He must think of her as a wanton woman. Worst of all, he believed she was a liar. She'd not disagree. After all, she hadn't been truthful in her reason for working in Castello DiSanto. To have him leery of her would not bode well for her plan. She must find a way to broach the subject without the knight suspecting she was there for an underhanded cause.

Halfway across the great room, Mariella caught a glimpse of Agora entering the double doors. She had avoided a confrontation with the woman, and Mariella didn't treasure one now. As she attempted to flee, Agora saw her.

“You there. Stop!”

Mariella's heart raced. Although Agora had no official rights over her, the late baron's wife could make her life miserable while she served the knight.

“You do not fool me, wench.”

Mariella fought to stay the viperous words building from within.

“I have seen you before,” Agora went on in a callous whisper. “At the *mercato*. What is it you want here? The baron?”

Mariella remained silent and maintained eye contact with the witch.

"You are merely a servant. The baron is used to women from proper families. Think you he would take you to his bed?"

So that was it. Agora was jealous. She meant to make certain the knight did not find a woman to make his wife, thereby ensuring she would remain a baroness and her son stood to inherit all that was DiSanto should the knight die.

"I have no control over the knight's desires," Mariella said. Indeed, she realized only moments ago that she had no control over her own. At least not where the baron knight was concerned.

Agora's lips pressed together, causing little cervices around her mouth. "A woman has more control than any man knows. Be certain you do not tempt Messer Romano's desires."

"As you wish."

Mariella gasped when Agora grabbed her braid and used it to bring her closer to the woman's scornful mien. "Oh, I do wish. Do not mess with me *signorina* whore. You'll not like what I will do to you."

"Mariella!"

The knight's thundering voice shook Mariella to the bone. It even rattled Agora, and she immediately released her braid. Running to the top of the stairs, Mariella paused to squint down at baroness. That one look made the woman recoil, as it had others who roused her anger.

Rushing through the door, Mariella stopped short. The knight and Giorgio stared at her with suspicion. She addressed him with caution.

"My lord baron knight?"

He held up his hand as if in a truce. "Enough with the many titles. Call me as others here do...Messer Romano."

"*Sì, messere.*" She glanced from one man to the other. "You called me here," she reminded him when he continued to stare.

"I did." He paced closer, his hands behind his back.

Knots formed in her stomach. Something was amiss.

"I trust your memory serves you well?" She had scarce time to nod before he continued on. "You were merely part truthful with me during our last conversation. It appears you forgot to mention who your father was and where you lived."

Her eyes darted from the knight to Giorgio, who remained stone still. What had the knight found out? "I thought it was not important."

"My *uccellino*."

His little bird? It was never a good sign when someone reverted to endearments and did not have the serene features to match. She mumbled a short prayer. And when he displayed the document she'd had hidden in her bodice, she repeated her prayer out loud.

"So you know what I have in my hand, do you?" he taunted.

Her hand flew to her bodice. How did he get it? She hadn't undressed the night before. Perhaps she should salvage his distrust with the truth. On the other hand, he might throw her into the dungeon because her dishonesty was meant to relieve him of a keep his sire vowed never to give up.

"I shall explain," she started, fearing his warrior side would surface. "Upon my father's death, I decided to fight for what little we had. The keep wasn't much, but without it, I would have no place to live."

"So you schemed to relieve me of my familial right?"

The truth, Mari. Only the truth.

"I prayed I could reason with you once you saw that I meant no harm or disrespect. Mayhap I thought you would be kind and see that the keep was in good hands under my care. It is all I have left of my father and mother. Before the pope gave the keep to my father, my family lived in one room above the butcher shop where my father worked until he cut off the fingers of his left hand with a knife because his other hand was besieged with crippling pain."

"That is all well and good, but the keep belongs to my family. The word of a pope means naught, and well you know it. The popes have lost their insidious power." He shook the parchment at her. "Did you compose this?"

She nodded.

"So you read and write?"

"Sì, *messere*."

"How did you intend to get me to sign it?"

"In truth, I did not think that far. I was more concerned with gaining an audience with you first."

"It appears as if I made it quite easy for you."

Mariella twisted her fingers. "If I may--"

"Hush, woman." Romano turned to Giorgio. "You know what to do."

As Giorgio walked across the chamber and out the door, a feeling of dread lay heavy in Mariella's stomach.

"I did not want to delve into matters concerning Castello DiSanto so soon after returning. But you have made it necessary for me to deal with certain issues before I have reacquainted myself with the *castello*. That does not make me happy, Mariella."

"No, *messere*, I am sure it does not." If her blasted legs did not stop trembling, she would assuredly collapse to the stone floor. "Will you sign the document?"

A budding smile lifted the corners of his mouth ever so slightly. "No."

"But you must," she insisted.

"No, *uccellino*. I have more on my mind before I consider this document you conjured. Should I decide to sign it, thereby turning the keep over to you for eternity, I shall certainly inform you. But as of this moment, you will have to work for what you dearly want."

Oh, Lord. This is not going to be good.

"That is all."

Dismissed? He was *dismissing* her? "When will I know what work you intend for me?"

Only one corner of his mouth lifted this time, and it was in a sneering smile.

"Soon, Mariella. Soon."

CHAPTER THREE

By dawn the next morning, Mariella was on her hands and knees, scrubbing the knight's chamber floor. She tossed her braid over her shoulder and wiped the stragglers away from her damp forehead. Sweat made her clothes stick to her body with great discomfort. She'd curse the knight for his unkind attempt to hold the keep over her head by seeing her to hard labor. Yet she would never give up until she tried in every way possible to retain her meager holdings.

The chamber door opened. Mariella kept working, wishing whoever entered would turn around and leave. Unlikely, though, for she knew too well that manly scent wafting into the room.

"You are not finished?"

She frowned to herself. "Your chamber is not small."

His footfalls quiet across the floor, he stopped beside her. Mariella glanced at his soft leather riding boots, following them up his muscular legs to his waist and beyond. A soft gasp left her mouth at the sight of the knight's clean-shaven face. He truly was handsome, more so than she had thought before.

"Come, I have another task for you."

It would be futile for her cause to object, so she got to her feet, groaning as her body straightened. Her back ached and her shoulders burned.

The knight sat upon his bed and pulled off his boots. When he began removing his hose, Mariella blanched. Just what had he in mind? He must know she'd not prostitute herself for the keep. Although lying with the knight might alleviate her curiosity about intimacy. No matter, she'd not reduce herself to groveling by using her body.

"Fetch the scissors, Mariella."

Scissors? Leery, she did as told.

The knight held out his feet. "As you can see, my toenails have not seen a groomer's hand in some months."

She stared at his feet, amazed to find them quite attractive. No cracks and blisters or festering, open sores. She had seen to her father's toenails. The task was not a difficult one. Unfortunately, had it been anyone other than the knight, her job would be easier.

"Mayhap Giorgio would be better suited—"

“I think not.”

Seeing no plausible way out, and determined to abide his wishes, Mariella dragged the bed stool over to the knight. He propped his feet upon it as she kneeled. Pretending she held her father's foot, she carefully cut one long nail after another, realizing it wasn't so bad to care for the knight's feet. Now and again her gaze strayed up his calf. But each time she stemmed the direction her eyes wandered before they naughtily climbed up his naked thighs. Would that she could allow herself the luxury. But she stoutly refused to let him see her interest—purely physical, but shameful nonetheless.

When finished, she discarded the trimmed nails into the hearth and returned the scissors to its box. Without hesitation, she went about scrubbing the floor again.

Romano watched the wench, his nerves unduly shattered. How the devil had she remained unaffected? He certainly had not. The instant she touched his foot, his flesh tingled all the way up his legs to his groin. Her fingers had been gentle, caring, as if she saw to his grooming lovingly. Now there she was, back on her hands and knees, as if naught had transpired between them.

“Know you how I came by the document?”

Keeping to her task, she replied, “I am curious.”

“I noticed a corner of it protruding above your bodice during the night, so I carefully removed it.”

Horried, she sputtered, but naught could she speak.

Just then, a wicked thought entered his mind. “I am tired, Mariella. Cease your cleaning and help me undress.”

A tremulous shine lit her beautiful eyes.

“The floor is not so bad that it cannot be finished on the morrow. I find I am still weary from my long journey home.”

“You removed your hose and boots without help, my lord. Can you not see to the remainder of your garments?”

Saucy wench. Romano smiled beneath the surface. “Mayhap I am too exhausted.”

She tossed the sponge into the bucket of water and jumped to her feet. “Very well. Let us get on with it.”

Her cheeks flushed, her eyes glowed. She was unhappy with his request. Romano enjoyed watching her subdued fury. He had no doubt she'd be a tempest should her ire reach an explosive high.

She unbuttoned his houppelande and pushed it off his shoulders while he remained passive, helpless. He was determined to make her work. When she reached for his tunic, she stopped suddenly. Her eyes followed the fabric across his chest and down his torso to the hem resting across his thighs. She must have realized the garment was the last bastion to his nudity. He heard her swallow. Without question, the wench would undress him. In the short span since she'd become his maidservant, he knew her strong will and his would clash, yet she was proud. Now that he was aware of her purpose, his means to giving her what she wanted was all the more sweeter.

If only his body did not signal his need, his desire. As he peered into her eyes, he saw a woman denied a man's touch. A woman uncertain of herself in the presence of a man. A woman with whom he could easily fall in love.

Romano tilted her chin upward to search her features. "You should have thought over the consequences before lying your way into a baron's castle," he said, his voice subdued. "Mayhap you thought to seduce me into signing your document?"

She attempted to pull away, but he circled his arm around her back and drew her closer, until her legs touched the mattress and she stood between his spread knees.

"I do not know how to seduce a man," she admitted, flicking her gaze upward. A slight blush crept up her cheeks.

"Then you shall learn."

Alarmed, she squeaked, "What say you?"

He held back a grin, instead fixing his features into a serious facade. "I have decided that if you seduce me properly, I shall sign over the keep to you."

Her wary gaze studied him. "You ask overmuch, my lord. You would force me into behaving as would a whore?"

"Not a whore, *uccellino*. A woman must know how to excite her man."

"You are not my man," she pointed out breathlessly, as if the thought overcame her senses.

"It matters not. If you desire to maintain your keep, you will not deny me."

She twisted out of his hold and backed up to the window. Turning, she stared down at the yard below. "I will think on it."

Romano frowned. Apparently, she did not want her father's keep that badly. "Do not think on it too long, Mariella. I will soon learn if that keep is indeed your father's or if I am entitled to it. Either way, you will have to prove to me that you truly want the keep for yourself."

* * *

Mariella thought of naught all day but the knight's offer. Did she have the fortitude to seduce him? The mere thought reverberated throughout her body, vacillating between the chills and heat too hot to manage.

Earlier, she had been able to strike it from her mind when she carried up a tray of food for the knight. He had yet to take a meal in the great hall and ate alone in his chamber, allowing her to eat her meals in the kitchen and do with her evening as she wished. Usually she and Rene, a servant just two years older, talked about their day. However, on this night, Mariella found it hard to concentrate and feared she'd mention the knight's disreputable request. No one, save for Giorgio, knew the reason she was at Castello DiSanto. And certainly, no one knew what she must do to hold onto the keep. Not even Giorgio.

When the day's weariness set in, Mariella headed back to the stairs. Agora caught up with her, detaining what Mariella wanted most—her bed.

"My son is not feeling well tonight. You must sit with him."

"Your son's nanny --"

"She, too, is ill. So that leaves you."

Mariella saw through the woman's ploy. "I fear you will have to sit with your son, *signora*. I am at Messer Romano's command. Not yours."

"Insolence will destroy you," the baroness warned and hurried up the steps, her intent too clear. The knight detested anyone barging into his chamber. Mariella had to deter Agora from doing so or the knight might punish her for allowing the woman's boldness to disturb him.

"Signora DiSanto, you must stop. The *messere* does not wish to be bothered. You will anger him."

At the chamber door, the woman corrected scornfully, "Baroness DiSanto."

Uncomfortable with addressing her nobly, for the wicked woman did not deserve the title, Mariella ignored the chastisement and begged her to retreat. Moments later, the door opened and the knight appeared, impatient and unhappy.

"Mariella?"

"My lord. Signora DiSanto and I --" What could she say? The man was not stupid. He obviously overheard their argument. "I am here to turn down your bed."

He stepped aside to allow her entrance. To Agora she heard him say, "Whatever your business, it will wait until morning."

When the door closed on Agora's squeal of protest, Mariella grinned.

As she prepared the knight's bed, she glanced up to find him leaning back against the chamber door, his arms folded and his head at an incline.

"My lord?"

"What is it about you Agora does not like?"

"I know not what I have done to garner her dislike of me."

"So you say."

Mariella busied herself with preparing her bed near the hearth. "Mayhap the *signora* would prefer sleeping in your chamber instead of me."

The knight's resounding laughter shook Mariella to the core. It wasn't so much what she said as it was how he reacted. She was serious while he seemed amused.

"You are astute, *uccellino*."

Mariella began to remove her shoes.

"Wait," the knight said. He sat upon his bed. "Now, remove your shoes and your hose."

Panic washed over her. He meant to watch her undress. He must know she took off her shoes only and slept in her clothes. One look at his face and she realized what he was about.

"Now? I am to seduce you *now*?"

"I am waiting, Mariella."

She closed her eyes and groaned. "I would ask that you find another way for me to retain my keep."

"Ask all you want, Mariella. My mind is set. Now, be on with it. Remove one shoe and then the other."

The arrogant lout. She was about to humiliate herself because of his lame reasoning for using seduction as a bargaining tool for the keep.

She pulled off her shoes and set them beside her pallet.

"No, no, no. That was all wrong," the knight said. "Mayhap you will do better with your hose."

"Your pardon, my lord. I sleep in what I am wearing. My shoes are all I remove."

His cunning smile slipped Mariella's throat into her stomach.

"Your hose, Mariella."

Breathing deeply did little to bolster her courage. Her hands trembled as she reached beneath her cherry blossom pink dress and gripped the top edge of her hose. She slid the light wool down, unrolling it slowly until she slipped it off her foot. Too ashamed to face the knight, she concentrated on her task and removed the other hose in the same fashion.

At last, she glanced up, shocked by the knight's stiff posture. His chest expanded with his held breath. She feared he might turn blue if he didn't release it.

"My lord?"

His breath floated past his lips, and he seemed incapable of speaking. She noticed his fingers crushing the counterpane within his white-knuckled grip and thought he was displeased with her performance. Thankfully, the knight came to his senses.

"You did well, Mariella. I will see you remove more on the morrow."

Incredibly, he lay down and rolled to his side, his back a closed door. Oddly, he did not undress as he usually did, for each night he slept in the flesh beneath the covers.

She stared down at her hose, and a shiver broke along the length of her neck. Never had she removed any part of her clothing in front of a man before. While shame still made her queasy, a small amount of excitement left her breathless. Had she really succeeded in seducing the knight? Or had she failed and that was the reason he ended the night so suddenly?

She doused the lamps then buried herself into her pallet. As she closed her eyes, she tried not to think about her incomplete seduction.

This is for the keep, Mariella. You must do whatever it takes to hold onto what belonged to father.

* * *

In the dawn of a new day, Mariella saw clearly what she must do. Seducing the knight would not be so bad. After all, he was uncommonly handsome. But she needed help. The only person she could rely on was Rene, who was laying fresh rushes in the great room.

Mariella tugged on Rene's sleeve. "I must speak with you," she whispered. "I need to learn how to seduce a man."

Rene pulled back in shock.

"Please, do not judge me, for I have no choice. This man has something of mine and I want it returned. He told me I had to seduce him before he would give it back."

A grim smile gave way to a grin. "I can help you. But first, do tell. Who is this man?"

"It is best to keep his identity to myself."

Rene scanned their surroundings, making certain no one watched them. "Come. Let's go into the storage room beside the kitchen. No one goes there this time of day."

Mariella's stomach turned circles. Her nerves refused to settle, and she could do naught but worry her fingers into knots. Inside the storage room, lit by a single lantern, she revealed, "He asked me to remove my shoes and hose last night. He insisted I roll my hose down my leg. Do you know why?"

"It's a man's nature to become aroused when a woman disrobes."

"Are you certain?"

"I have seduced a few men before. They are easy to please, I think." She grinned again. "First, you must take your time. Roll your hose down as slowly as you can, and every now and again, look the man in the eye with this look."

Rene's features changed from innocent to mysterious and entrancing. She appeared to beckon, her dark eyes sultry, her smile inviting. Mariella could not guess how she did it.

"Now you try it."

Her first attempt made Rene erupt into giggles.

"In truth, Mariella, you look as if you are in pain."

"Oh, I cannot do this," she fretted.

"Si, you can. Now try again."

There was more to seducing a man than Mariella expected. But with Rene's guidance, she might be a bit more comfortable in her new role. God willing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Knots twisted her stomach as Mariella climbed the stairs. She prayed she'd remember all Rene had taught her. Grateful for her newfound friend, Mariella mumbled Rene's instructions under her breath. By the time she stood outside the knight's chamber, her body was covered by the heat of a blush that refused to go away.

She turned her nose down to sniff her underarms. "This is not good."

The labors of the past days clung to her with an unpleasant odor. Mayhap the knight would not notice she hadn't bathed in three days. After all, he was used to bedding down near men who had not seen a bath in weeks, perhaps months. Would that she could bathe away her smell and fears.

"The keep, Mariella. Remember, you are going through with this for Father's keep."

Her hand trembled on the door handle. She prayed the knight was already asleep in bed. Instead, she found him walking out of the adjoining room. They both stopped and stared.

"I shall turn down your bed," Mariella said, wishing her throat wouldn't constrict. It made speaking a chore.

The knight nodded but did not move. When she finished, she waited in awkward silence for him to bid her to something more. She'd remove her shoes and hose, but she knew not if he wanted to watch again.

Finally, he walked over to his chest and pulled off his boots and hose. Only his thigh-length undertunic remained, which he usually wore in the privacy of his chamber.

"Your pardon, *messere*." He kept his back to her, giving her the chance to appreciate the sturdiness of those bare legs she had viewed at close range just two days past. "May I bathe in the servants' quarters?"

"You may bathe. However, you will make use of my personal tub." He came around then, a light of amusement in his eyes. "And I will be here to help you."

"No!" She swallowed down her apprehension. If he touched her, she feared her reaction. How would he perceive her if she behaved wanton? If she could not control her desire for him?

One corner of his mouth lifted in a knowing smile. He already knew she found him attractive and would most likely not deny him. She'd simply dispel any belief he harbored, for she'd not serve him if her body repeatedly misbehaved.

"I need no help. I have bathed myself since childhood."

"Mayhap, Mariella, but think of what pleasure could be had."

She'd rather not.

"All right. On the morrow, you shall have your bath."

"And tonight?"

He shrugged casually. "What of tonight?"

"Will I be allowed to my bed without undressing in front of you?"

The knight sighed. All Mariella wanted was a simple *si*. Instead, she gasped in shock when he tore off his undertunic and walked in all God's glory to his bed. Swallowing over and over, she could not dislodge the dry lump erected in her throat. She tried desperately to keep her gaze above his chest. It was a battle she very nearly lost.

* * *

Romano rose early. He had fought sleep the night before, the darkness bombarded with visions of Mariella bathing. The wench intrigued him, no doubt about it. She was comely, saucy, and he discovered he liked how pleasingly she blushed when faced with matters of the flesh.

"Bedamned," he muttered, the tightness in his groin returning. He should bed the wench, satisfy his curiosity about her and the lust that remained sensitive whenever she was near. Indeed, whenever she entered his thoughts, which was quite often. Never before had he obsessed over a woman.

He entered his chamber, expecting to find Mariella. Instead, the room was still, quiet, his bed and her pallet neat. His gaze snapped to the storage room door, and his heart pounded fiercely. He marched across the floor, fearful he'd find Mariella within the room where his secret lay hidden.

Listening, he heard only the heavy beating of his heart. Romano guardedly pushed open the door. His possessions appeared untouched, in place just as he had left them. Sighing with great relief, he closed the door. When he turned around, he jumped at the sight of Agora standing in the doorway of his chamber. He narrowed his eyes on her.

"Your maidservant has fled."

A spear of alarm shot through Romano's body.

"She tried to take one of your horses, but the stablemaster would not let her," Agora went on. Her tone brooked disdain.

He barely kept his tension in check. More so because it was Agora relaying Mariella's leaving. "Know you what she was about?"

"Mayhap she has a lover."

Romano hurried across the room, his long strides reaching the chamber door swiftly. Agora hopped out of his way else he would have toppled her to the floor. At the top of the stairs, he stopped abruptly, pivoted and returned to close the storage room door. He'd not trust Agora alone near his chamber. He harbored no doubts that she'd snoop through his room and the storage to discover something about him she could use in her favor. He knew what she was about. If her son was indeed sired by his father, the boy would be next in line to inherit everything DiSanto.

* * *

Mariella sat upon her bed in her father's keep. She glanced about the room, seeing how poor it seemed in comparison to the knight's chamber. That mattered not, though, for the keep was comfortable, a safe haven away from the realities of the outside world.

Lorenza peeked around the door. Concern marred her otherwise pretty features. In her thirty-fifth year, the woman maintained her appearance, as well as her black hair, not a silver thread in sight. Mariella knew not what she would have done without Lorenza, who had helped her deal with her mother's death ten years past, as well as her father's passing.

"It is good to see you well, Mari."

Warm memories surfaced and Mariella smiled fondly. Her father and mother had called her Mari. "I told you there was naught to worry about and that I would return."

She stepped into the room. "Your plan worked?"

"Not yet. I am working on the baron knight. I have come only to gather clothes. I fear I am ripe with odors from wearing this dress for three days."

"He is treating you well?"

Unable to avoid it, Mariella blushed.

Lorenza rushed up to her. "He did not—?"

"Rest easy, Lorenza. He has not touched me inappropriately." Oh but that certainly was not the truth. A heated glance, watching her remove her hose, strutting naked about his chamber... Mariella shivered. Naught was appropriate about her service to the knight. Yet she'd not blame him entirely. "I am his personal servant."

Lorenza gasped. "Surely he has a manservant to see to his personal needs?"

"He has." She chose not to reveal the reason Messer Romano retained her to care for him in his private chamber. "Please, do not worry about me. I am safe. I assure you. The knight has promised to sign the document."

"What is keeping him?"

Again, Mariella blushed, that infernal lifelong affliction giving away those moments when her thoughts turned to something inappropriate. "He is awaiting word about the history of this keep."

Frowning, Lorenza stared at her eyes, looking for something more, perhaps. "Is that all?"

"Sì, that is all." Mariella opened the trunk beside the only window in her room and pulled out a clean yellow undertunic and hose. She reached deep into the trunk for the dark pink dress with yellow trim. It was her finest outfit, saved for the marriage her father had always dreamed of for her. "I shall change into these."

Lorenzo's brows rose, but Mariella ignored what was going through the woman's mind.

"Come, help me out of my clothes and into the clean ones. I must return to Castello DiSanto before the knight realizes I am gone."

* * *

Romano rode through the small town outside his *castello*. He saw naught of Mariella at the *mercato* or in any of the shops. No one he questioned had seen her, either.

A young man approached. Romano stared down at the scruffy youth from atop his horse. "Speak, boy."

"*Cavaliere*, I know the woman you are searching for."

His body pulled taught. How well did he know her? Damn Agora for placing the notion of Mariella having a lover in his mind.

"She came to my father's shop twice a week for bread."

"Have you seen her this morn?"

"No, my lord."

Impatient, Romano snapped, "What is it, then?"

"Since her father's passing, her servant comes for bread. I inquired about Mariella, to which the servant replied that she sits in her chamber playing the harp to help her through mourning."

"Harp?"

"*Si*, my lord. She played for me once."

Romano bludgeoned the youth with his severe countenance. Had Mariella entertained this shopkeeper's son in her chamber?

The boy blanched. "Your pardon, *cavaliere*. I do not intend to smear the good name of the girl. She played in the *mercato* one morning. Truly, her fingers are delicate across the strings. Her music is beautiful."

"Are you telling me she may be at her keep?"

"*Si*."

Romano dropped a coin into the boy's hand and rode off. Halfway to the keep, he saw her, walking in the field of dark green grass. Her head was down, and she carried something in her arms. He spurred his horse ahead, his gaze a constant on Mariella.

She halted the instant she noticed his approach. "Messer Romano!"

"Think you to leave my *castello* without my consent?" In truth, he was happy to see her, assured she was not harmed. Deep down, though, he couldn't ease the feeling that she meant to desert him.

"Your pardon, my lord. I returned to my...father's keep for clean clothing."

He scanned her from head to toe. She wore a different dress, more expensive than the last. Her father was not a baron. As far as Romano knew, thanks be to Giorgio for apprising him of Mariella's sire, the man had no money to speak of. Just how did she come by such finery?

Romano reached a hand down. "Come, I will ride you back to the *castello*."

"I am capable of walking."

"So you are." He was not about to argue with the wench. He was of a mind to leave her, wait for her in the great room, but his good conscience attacked him. What if harm came to her? What if he never saw her again? "Bedamned," he gritted and jumped down from his horse.

"What are you about?" she shrieked when he lifted her into his arms.

"Keeping you safe, *uccellino*."

"I have walked this path often in my life. Never has harm come to me." She squirmed.

"Please, release me."

A smile curved his lips upward, and Romano found her sudden blush rewarding. Without

warning, he kissed her, reveling in the softness of her lips, cherishing the virginal response from the woman who had niggled her way into his heart.

“Wh – Why did you do that?” Her rounded eyes filled with purity and wonder.

“Was it appalling?”

Words failed her, and she moved her head in a gesture of no.

Romano chuckled as he lifted her to his horse and mounted behind, fitting her into the circle of his arms and snug against his body. In an eye's blink, his groin pulled taut, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he became hard with the want of Mariella.

She held onto her cloth-wrapped bundle as if her life depended on it and remained tense until he set her down at the entrance to the great room.

* * *

In the knight's chamber, Mariella unwrapped the extra clothes she had brought and neatly folded them beside her pallet. She flitted about the room, tidying, wiping away imaginary dust, tending to a hearth that hadn't been used in weeks because of the warmer temperature. Anything she could do to erase the memory of the knight's kiss and the lingering feel of his masculine body at her back would be a blessing. To her dismay, naught seemed to help.

Beside the window she peered down, seeing only the knight's face moving closer, his lips so very near. His kiss had been gentle, teasing, oh so appealing. Even now, recalling how her body had warmed and her toes had curled, Mariella blushed. With a heavy sigh, she turned away.

“Would that I could read your thoughts,” the knight said, smiling tenderly.

“I fear you'd not find much,” she replied, ashamed of what she truly felt.

He chuckled as he sauntered toward her. Panic registered low in her belly, turning her senses weak. Crossing her arms, she tried to quell the nerves skittering up her chest and causing her heart to pound heavily.

“I think not, Mariella. You are a smart woman. You read and write. And you had the courage to come to me to challenge my right to the keep. I admire that, *uccellino*.”

He cupped her cheek in his hand and smiled. She couldn't help trembling.

“Then you will make a decision about the keep posthaste?”

His smile turned amusing. “And not experience the pleasure of your seduction?”

She gasped for air the instant he pulled her to his chest and kissed her soundly, giving her little room to deny his ardor. Soon, his kiss turned soft, giving. She responded with a little moan and leaned into him, absorbing his mouth with great delight. Never had she imagined kissing a man could be this exciting or taste as sweet as wine. His hands framed her face, and he lifted his head to her meager protest. She succumbed to the gentle stroking of his thumbs at her cheeks.

"I fear I'd carry you to my bed if I do not control myself, Mariella."

"That would not do," she said, lying to save herself from dishonor. More than anything, she wanted to know how his naked flesh felt beneath her hands, how her petite body fit into his virile one.

"Alas, I will save any pleasure for the coming night."

"Tonight?"

"Si. Tonight, when you will remove your clothing –"

"Will I be allowed a bath before then?"

"I have given you my word. You shall have your bath."

The twinkle in his eyes gave her no comfort. It was what might come after the bath she feared.

* * *

In the great hall, hums of conversation and raucous laughter filled the air. The evening meal was the first Romano had taken in the hall among his people since his return. No doubt many wondered about him, if he'd be as strict and difficult as his sire, or if he'd be less judgmental. He had yet to know himself. So far, he liked what he'd seen in the *castello* and outside its walls. Despite his father's severe rule, every inhabitant seemed happy and prosperous.

Agora slipped into the seat beside him, smug and acting like royalty. Romano did not hide his dislike for her, yet her son was a joy and a remarkable four-year-old who already knew his mind. And his place, unlike his shrew mother.

"The great hall has been silent since the baron's death," she commented. "Mayhap you should make a speech."

He crushed the table linen in his fist. "Do not assume the position of wife with me."

She pulled back, affronted. "Your sire would have welcomed –"

"My sire is dead. I am lord here, and you'd do well to remember that."

Agora pinched her mouth together and straightened in her seat.

Across the room, Mariella and Rene entered the hall laughing. Would that he could know what caught her fancy. He realized his fist eased away from the linen, and he smiled without intending to. The wench lightened his mood and his heart.

When Rene disappeared into the kitchen, Mariella started for the dais. She approached him with confidence, a trait he admired in her, even though it often led to willful behavior. He followed her until she stood at his side.

"Is there anything you desire, my lord?"

The instant it left her mouth, she blushed. Romano chuckled softly and lifted his hand to her warm cheek. She held her breath, knowing exactly what he desired. The fact that he made it known to the entire room was not lost on her. She took a step back, but he grabbed her hand and tugged her forward.

"This eve, in my chamber, you will satisfy my desire."

"My lord," she muttered. "Please do not speak as such among your people. I am your servant, not your wife."

Oddly, he wished she was. He'd know joy in waking up to her beautiful face each morning. "It matters not, *uccellino*. You cannot stop me from saying or doing as I wish. Mayhap I should carry you upstairs to my chamber now."

She yanked her hand out of his and backed up quickly, unaware of the server behind her. When they collided, a trencher of boiled meat and gravy spilled down her back. Her shriek brought Romano to his feet. He spun her around to see what damage the hot food wrought. Thankfully, her clothing was thick and protected her from burning.

"You are all right," he assured, turning her to face him. "Your gown saved your flesh from the heat."

She appeared more humiliated than worried about injury.

"Go on. Retire for the evening in my chamber. I shall bid Giorgio to have water brought up for your bath."

Her eyes rounded on the room, which had gone silent. "Oh," she breathed, searching the faces staring at her from the floor. She then found Agora, whose glare angered Romano. Without another sound, Mariella dashed up the stairs.

Romano frowned with disgust. Directed not at Mariella but at the woman sitting beside him. "I would entreat you to see to Mariella, but I do not trust your character."

Her lips pinched in again, a sign, he realized, that she was duly put in her place. He'd keep a close eye on Agora, especially where Mariella was concerned.

CHAPTER FIVE

True to his word, Romano bade Giorgio to pull the tub into his chamber from the storage room. Two male servants Mariella had not seen before carried buckets of steaming hot water up the stairs. She bore the brunt of their knowing glances, believing she was the knight's whore. Her body flushed from the injustice of their belief. Yet she was too ashamed to set them straight. What did it matter, anyway? Once she was back at the keep, she'd never face these servants again.

After the last buckets were poured and she was alone, Mariella removed her shoes and hose. When she attempted to untie the laces at the back of her dress, they tangled and knotted. She tried to lift the dress over her head, but the bodice was cinched in to conform to her upper body, and no amount of tugging set her free.

Tears of frustration rimmed her eyes. Why hadn't she given more thought to the clothing she chose to wear? Lorenza had helped her dress, but who would she obtain to aid her now? Rene? She was the only one Mariella trusted.

The chamber door opened, and Messer Romano strode in, his broad smile fading into concern. "Is the bath not to your liking?"

He had expected her to be submerged in the tub. "I do not know since I've yet to disrobe and sink into the heat of luxury."

"Do you need a hand?"

Her knees trembled at the thought. "Mayhap Rene –"

"Allow me."

Mariella thought about forgoing the bath, but it was too inviting to pass up. "I will manage on my own."

The knight's head inclined. "Then be about it."

"May I have privacy?"

"No, *uccellino*. I believe you owe me a seduction."

The cur would hold her to it when all she wanted was to soak her worries away in a hot bath. If she refused to acquiesce, she'd only spite herself. So Mariella relented and reached behind her to fumble with the knot. When tugging tightened it, she worked carefully to loosen the ties. Without realizing, she twisted this way and that, apparently looking silly enough for the knight to chuckle.

"You have a most peculiar way of seducing a man," he commented.

"I assure you, *messere*, I am not seducing you. I am merely trying to remove this blasted dress!" He started toward her. "Stay away. I shall do this on my own."

"I will grow old and gray before you do," he said, not at all angry. His light mood gave her pause, given that he commanded her to seduce him. Another man might have lost patience and torn the clothing from her body.

After one more attempt, she turned her back to the knight in defeat and held her breath until she felt his fingers on her dress. He was gentle, working slowly. When at last he pulled the laces apart and her bodice loosened, Mariella knew not whether to be happy or afraid. There was naught now to stop her from completing the seduction he desired.

He placed a brushing kiss on her neck, giving her a shiver. "Do not fear what your body was made for."

"My fears would ease if I knew what you intend to do once I seduce you."

He spun her around to face his inquiry. "Your meaning?"

"Do you intend to let me go and live my life in my father's keep? Or do you intend to go beyond the mere act of seduction?"

"If you mean sinking myself into your sweet flesh, I cannot say."

Unwanted excitement scuttled through her belly and settled between her thighs. Why would she react like a woman in need when she preferred to be left alone? Or did she?

Mariella swallowed to combat the anxiety over what she must do. Over what the knight might do. Could she partake of his pleasure and not return for more? It was plain to see his breathtaking body and handsome face captured the lust buried deep inside of her. Was she an immoral woman for allowing that lust freedom?

The knight pushed her dress down until it fell about her feet. Mariella averted her eyes, fearful of what she might find in the knight's. Perhaps more fearful the message there mirrored her own. The only thing left was her undertunic, a thin garment providing no real barrier to the treasure the knight sought.

At last she met his gaze. Flames of desire burned in his eyes, venturing beyond mere lust. She saw a genuine need, a man hungry enough to devour her. She stepped away from him. Gripping the hem of the tunic, she lifted it leisurely, prolonging her unveiling. This was the way to seduce a man, Rene had told her. Do not rush. Slowly drive his need to the point where he cannot hold himself back any longer.

The knight inhaled sharply. Mariella half-closed her eyes, hoping she appeared sultry and not sleepy. She must have succeeded, for the knight's breathing quickened as his eyes followed the hem, higher and higher until she cleared her hips. She ran her tongue across her lips, feeling ridiculous but reveling in the fact she controlled the baron with her actions.

"Do not torture me, Mariella," he whispered, his voice roughened by desire.

She smiled to herself as she continued her journey to womanhood. It mattered not if he was satisfied with her seduction or if he took her to his bed. Caught up in her act, she believed she could stop him at her will.

At last, she doffed the tunic and dropped it with a flick of her wrist to the floor. Without taking her eyes away from the knight's, she stepped into the tub and sank into the blessed heat. Picking up the soap and cloth from the stool beside the tub, she offered it to the knight. "I believe I need help washing my back."

His features went through a gamut of expressions, of which the most prominent was shock. Fluctuating between shame and daring, Mariella could not back down now. She had come too far in playing the knight's game.

Romano thought he was the luckiest bastard in all of Piemonte to have a beautiful woman offer herself to him. Washing her back was the prelude to a night of bliss. She had to know that. But she did not. Her naiveté shone through in the oftentimes tentative way she looked at him. Still, she had seduced him like a seasoned woman, leaving him to wonder if his bargain had been a wise one to make.

Taking the soap and cloth, he knelt beside the tub. Even with her pale skin covered in gooseflesh, he thought she had the most enticing back he'd ever seen. She was slender, graceful up to her neck. Her shoulder blades protruded, though not in an unsightly way. Her hips flared out, just enough to give her feminine body the right amount of curves. Curves his hands itched to mold around.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Have you never bathed a woman before?"

None he cared to bring to mind, he would have said had his throat not thickened with nervous tension. He dunked the cloth into the water and drew it across her back. Her flesh danced in his wake, bringing a smile to his face and easing his apprehension. Her seduction was what he wanted. To his astonishment, it was no longer enough.

Romano washed her shoulders and neck, leaning in to touch his lips to her lily white beauty. She shivered but said naught to turn him away. His dragged the tip of his finger across one shoulder and down her arm. He half-turned her, dropping the cloth and soap and gathering her into his embrace. Tenderness betrayed him the instant their mouths met and she kissed him with as much passion as he possessed. Save for his stolen kisses and familiarity with her tempting lips, the rest of her was as pure as a winter's morn.

Not ready to release her, he planted one hand behind her head. His tongue traced the edges of her mouth and without pause plunged deep within. She tasted divine and refreshing like summer fruit. Perhaps that was what she had last eaten. He could not get enough but feared he'd frighten her if he pushed for more.

Romano eased up, dragging in a deep breath as he gazed down at the roused state of her features. "Mariella, I fear if I do not stop now, I—"

She sat upright and criss-crossed her arms over her breasts. The blush on her cheeks turned bright red, as if shame beat down on her. "Truth be told, I have more than fulfilled my service to you. I have seduced you, apparently quite thoroughly."

The truth hit hard, and Romano felt the color drain from his face. He rose abruptly. "Sì, you have done as I asked." He treaded heavily toward the door. "I'll leave you to your bath. Soon I will give you my decision about the keep."

"Your decision?" Her voice rose. "You said—"

"I am aware of what I said. First, I must know if the keep is mine to give, or if it belongs to the church."

She fished the soap out of the water and hurled it across the room. Romano leaned to one side, else her aim would have met with his forehead. Quite an arm for one so petite, he mused.

"I am a man of my word, Mariella."

"Which word is that, my lord? The one you speak or the one that speaks for you?"

He had no idea what she meant. It mattered little. His word was law in the *castello*, and she was his servant. That she had no sire or male relative to see to her welfare played well in his favor. Either she had forgotten that fact, or she meant to prove she did not need a man in her life. For some odd reason, the latter sat heavily in his gut.

* * *

Early the next morning, Mariella carried her dress down to the laundress, praying the gravy stains would come out. She didn't dwell over the reason the knight stayed away from his chamber last night. She did wonder where he had slept, though. Was it with a servant in the *castello*?

Across the great hall, Agora glided from one room to another, smiling. The woman never smiled. Suspicion raised the hackles at Mariella's nape. Had the knight and Agora—?

"Do not be daft," she mumbled. The knight had little use for his father's widow.

She shook the unsettling thoughts from her head and headed for the herb garden outside the kitchen to find Rene.

Manicured rows of herbs and vegetables filled a sizeable plot. It was far more vast and elaborate than she had ever maintained. Because only she and Lorenza worked the keep's meager plot, they grew just the essential herbs and very few vegetables.

Rene saw her and hurried over. "Did you do it?"

Mariella nodded shyly. "Faith, it was easier than I thought."

"Men are simple creatures. The mere sight of a woman's body makes them weak."

They shared a giggle, then Mariella turned serious. "You were raised here at Castello DiSanto." Rene's mother had been one of the cooks and her father a soldier in Messer Romano's army. "What kind of baron was the knight's sire?"

"Mean, oftentimes. Kind only when it suited him. We stayed out of his way, mostly. Before he died, he babbled and drooled like a babe. Once, he left his chamber without his clothes. Giorgio cared after him. The baron would have no other in the end."

"And his wife and son?"

Rene leaned closer and spoke in a hushed voice. "No one knows for certain what that woman's role is. She appeared one day with a babe, claiming it was the baron's."

Mariella wondered if the knight was aware of what Rene had revealed. No doubt, he was. Giorgio was privy to the elder baron's secrets, and he continued his role as manservant to Messer Romano, even though she intruded on many of the man's responsibilities.

"Mayhap the knight is much like his sire," Mariella mused aloud.

"Why do you say that?"

"Last night I did as he asked, yet he will not hold to his word."

Rene's features fell wide with shock. "The baron is the man you seduced?"

"Not by my choice, I assure you."

"Do tell, did he—"

"No, he did not take me to his bed. That was not part of the agreement, though I know not if he will honor it—my father's keep for the seduction."

"Faith, Mariella, I would think he'd ask for your virginity in exchange for a building," Rene said. "Do not worry. My father says Messer Romano is a fair man, a man of his word."

"Then why does he dangle the keep in front of me like a meaty bone enticing a dog?"

Rene smiled, and her dark eyes glittered. "Mayhap the baron has taken a fancy to you."

"Hush!" Mariella admonished, looking about the garden to make certain no one overheard. "I am merely a servant."

"You have more liberties with the *messere* than servants are allowed. Think you gossip has not spread wildly about your role to him?"

She was miserably aware of it. "You must nip the flowering of gossip, Rene. I'll not be humiliated any further."

The hairs on Mariella's arms prickled. The knight approached, she knew, for that same reaction occurred every time he was near. She set a finger to her lips to silence further conversation.

"So I have found you," he said.

He wore a short burgundy tunic and a belt slung around his hips. Mariella couldn't help staring at the dark gray hose molded to his muscles.

"I thought you might have wandered off again," he continued, the shine in his eyes playful.

"There was naught to do in your chamber, my lord, so I asked Rene if she needed help gathering herbs and vegetables for this eve's meal."

He pinned Rene with a direct look, the one that undoubtedly caused his enemies to cower. Mariella doubted he was aware of how dangerous he appeared.

"Can you do this chore yourself, girl?"

"Si, my lord." Fear that she displeased her lord drifted into Rene's eyes, and she bowed her head.

"Good." He held his hand out toward the yard. "A word, Mariella?"

Because he asked in kindness, she became wary. Toying with the fabric of her dress to alleviate her stress, Mariella found one reason to be grateful—the knight slowed his gate to her shorter strides.

"You surprised me last night," he said.

She avoided eye contact. His mention of the seduction was enough to make her glow with embarrassment, so she focused on the path ahead.

"It was your wish."

"It was."

She felt his intent gaze upon her.

"In truth, I did not expect you to abide my wish. But you did, and well you seduced me. Sleep was most difficult all the night long."

"Your pardon, my lord, but it was of your own making."

"So it was," he said in a ponderous tone.

They continued in silence until they came upon an area of lush green grass with a lifelike statue of a man on horseback. The resemblance to the knight mystified Mariella. "It that you?"

"I am not so noble, nor do I deserve such praise."

"I do not understand."

"You are looking at my grandfather. A knight as well as a baron. I believe he claimed this castle in a duel to the death with a worthless rival baron. What I've yet to learn is if the keep was part of the spoils."

"I would think your sire knew the truth."

"If he did, he held it on his tongue."

"Surely he told Giorgio."

“Apparently, my father never mentioned it to him.”

“And the town?”

“My grandfather’s. He hired carpenters to build the town as soon as he moved into the *castello*.”

The knight touched a finger to her lips, then her cheek. Mariella instantly warmed and leaned away. He splayed his fingers at her back and moved her closer, so close his wine-tinged breaths fanned out over her face. Her heart pounded in a crazy rhythm. If he did not quit this torture and kiss her, she feared the incessant pounding would deafen her ears.

“Ah, *uccellino*, it seems I crave you more than I should. I fear my body will never be appeased unless it has made you mine.”

“No, my lord. You cannot. I am here for my keep. That is all. You and I—”

His mouth abducted the breath from her lungs. She could not help herself and pressed her body fully into him, the rise of his desire hard against her belly. Her arms hugged his thick neck, clinging as if the ground would fall away from beneath her feet. A baron confessed his need for her, and she did naught to discourage him.

End it, Mari. You must end it now. What if someone sees you? What if word of your loose behavior spread to the town? To Lorenza?

A man cleared his throat. The knight didn’t seem to notice, but to Mariella it sounded as loud as a canon blast. She pushed with all her strength at the knight’s wide chest. When finally her action got through to him, he released her lips with a low growl.

Her palms rested against his raggedly moving chest. Giorgio stood tall and stiff nearby, and when he glanced at her hands then at her face, Mariella quickly put a yard between her and the knight.

“There is a messenger here to speak with you, my lord.”

The knight had yet to ease his breathing. He was staring at her in an odd way, as if saying she was responsible for the interruption. Mariella burned with embarrassment. She could not bear Giorgio’s silent castration or the knight’s fiery intent, his look conveying he would readily finish what he had started.

Dashing up the steps and into the *castello*, Mariella kept her head bent as she ran across the hall and up the stairs. Besieged with guilt for enjoying the knight's kiss, she did not see the baroness at the top of the stairs until it was too late. Just as Mariella jumped the last step, she collided with Agora. Unsteady, Mariella frantically waved her arms for balance. Her hand flopped outward for Agora to take it, to save her from falling. But the woman stood her ground, her mouth fixed with a sneer. A shrill scream rent the air as Mariella tumbled downward, the stone cruel and unforgiving.

CHAPTER SIX

Lying upon his bed, Mariella appeared small, childlike. She was still, her features pale. Romano sat beside her, holding her hand, praying she'd come to soon. She suffered no broken bones, the bump behind her head and a bruise on her cheek the only signs of the fall.

Giorgio stood in the doorway. "Signora DiSanto awaits you in the hall."

Romano rose, hesitant to leave Mariella. "Remain with her. I'll not have her awaken to an empty chamber."

Below, Romano steeled his anger, if only to prevent him from strangling Agora before he learned the truth. If she had any part in Mariella's accident, he prayed he'd handle it in fairness. At the moment, his gut constricted, and looking at Agora intensified the sick feeling sitting like a weight in his stomach.

"Know you how this happened?" he asked, his tone amazingly controlled.

Her pithy features changed to innocence. "I know not what caused her to fall. She was running up the steps. Mayhap something startled her."

The woman was a seasoned liar, an evil person, and he knew instinctively she shouldered part of the blame for Mariella's fall. Whether it was deliberate or truly an accident, he intended to find out.

"I should turn you out."

"I was your sire's wife. I bore his son. You cannot—"

"Do not test me, woman. I am my father's son. And while I am fair with others and he was not, I am of a mind to see you banished from my *castello* and its environs."

"My son—"

"I fear for your son. The child has no one to look to for guidance, save for me. He is the only reason you are still here."

She drew herself up and pinched in her mouth.

"Stay away from Mariella. Should I find you near her, I'll not hesitate to turn you out on your own."

Romano walked away. He did not trust himself to remain objective with Agora. Until Mariella opened her eyes, he would be patient. Pray she'd have full control of her memory. Even though she had fallen halfway down the stairs and not to the bottom, it was enough to cause her great harm. She was fortunate the fall did not kill her.

In his chamber again, he released a sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. Tense and worried, he wondered how he had come to care for Mariella in so short a time. He had known her barely a week, yet his heart pounded relentlessly where she was concerned.

"Go below," he bade Giorgio. "I want Agora watched. I do not trust that woman."

* * *

A dull ache afflicted Mariella's head. Touching the back, she moaned from the pain of the bump she felt there. Thank the Lord she was alive. Moving her limbs one by one, she breathed easier knowing naught was broken. She then realized something was quite wrong. The softness beneath her was different. While her pallet was comfortable, it was never this cushiony. Opening her eyes, she stared across to the window near the bed and the hearth not far away. She glanced up at the ceiling, then snuggled deeper into the mattress and beneath the many covers. So this was how it felt to sleep in the knight's bed.

The knight's bed!

Mariella peeked beneath the counterpane. Glory be to God, her clothes remained intact. At least the knight hadn't undressed her. Comforted by that thought, she sighed again.

"I would welcome you back, but I find your sighs and the fact that you are in my bed a bit troubling."

She brought the covers up to her chin. "I thank you for laying me here. It *was* you who carried me up, was it not?"

"It was." He stepped up to the side of the bed. "I am glad you are awake."

He sat beside her legs. Mariella would have bounded up and away if her head did not spin every time she moved.

"Do you recall how you came to be in my bed?"

"I do."

He stared at her, waiting for more, perhaps. She thought back.

"I met with Agora at the top of the stairs. It was my fault. My head was down as I ran up, and I did not see her."

"I will know the truth, Mariella. Did she push you?"

Push? No, she did not, but neither did the woman come to her aid to prevent her from falling. "No."

The knight grunted. She sensed he was not satisfied with her answer.

"I would like to move to my pallet," she requested shyly.

A smile softened his features. "You will rest better in my bed." He rose and walked toward the door. "I will send Rene up to assist you. Mayhap you will be more comfortable in your nightdress."

"Truth be told, I would be more comfortable if I were in my own bed at the keep."

His smile broadened. "But I would not, *uccellino*."

* * *

Days later, Romano's nerves all but turned him into a roving fool. He could not sleep. Neither could he eat nor settle down long enough to complete any task. He purposely stayed away from his chamber during the night. In the light of day, he went up to see how Mariella fared. Even that became a tortuous burden. His body craved the wench. It reminded him how badly and how irrevocably his heart was involved. He never intended to settle down. He was a soldier. It was the only life he had ever known. And now, one unsuspecting woman changed his future, for he knew for certain he could never live without Mariella.

A messenger from the French king awaited him in the great hall. At last, he would know the truth behind the *castello*.

Romano entered hurriedly but immediately paused when he saw the crest of the Roman church on the man's chest. He had expected a representative for Benedict XII of Avignon. Confused, he sought out Giorgio, who stood by stoically.

Frowning, Romano addressed the man. "Have you business with me?"

"Baron DiSanto," the man acknowledged. "I am here on behalf of Pope Benedict."

Romano's confusion grew.

"Allow me." The tall, podgy man pulled documents out of a pouch hanging from his belt and unfolded them over the trestle table left up from the mid-day meal. "I was sent here upon the death of your sire. However, I was unable to rectify my journey because his heir was not present."

Apprehension grew. Romano feared what this man was about to say.

* * *

Mariella was tired and bored lying in bed with naught to do. The knight insisted she rest until she fully recovered, and he wouldn't listen to reason that she was fine. Rene had laced her into the dress she'd worn the night she seduced Baron DiSanto. It had been laundered with care and returned just this morning.

At the top of the stairs, she heard the knight's voice. Following the terse sound, she slowly came down the steps and stopped out of sight. Hunkering down, Mariella prayed no one would catch her eavesdropping.

"You lie!" the knight accused.

"Records for the castle were kept at an abbey in Turin. See it with your own eyes," said the man whose voice Mariella had never heard before. "It is all right here. Your grandfather Baron Gennaro DiSanto dueled with Baron Emilio Rizzoli's son, Giacomo, and won. All that was habitable of the original castle was the keep. Baron DiSanto ordered the castle torn down, save for the keep, and he built this castle as well as the town outside the wall."

Mariella froze, her breath shallow in her chest. The keep had belonged to her family. Why had her father never told her? Emilio was her great-grandfather. That had been all she knew of her family. Her father, Emiliano, had been named for him. But never had anyone mentioned he was a baron.

She covered her face, digesting the meaning of it all. She was not a commoner. Questions abounded. Was the duel legal? Was the keep hers? Or did it belong to the DiSanto family because her grandfather died in the duel?

"Oh, this is too much to for my mind to allow in," she whispered on a moan.

The voices in the hall faded into the dark recesses of her mind. Numbed by what she discovered, Mariella retreated back to the knight's chamber, wondering if he would reveal the truth or keep up the decade's old secret between their two families.

Evening descended before the knight entered his chamber. Mariella sat on the window ledge, staring out over the quiet land. He stood in silence for several moments before he spoke.

"Go down to the kitchen. Rene is awaiting you with your meal."

She slowly turned her head, unhappy by his clipped tone. "So, I am finally well enough?" She slipped off the ledge. As she walked past him, she sensed his restlessness. "Have you taken your meal?"

He was genuinely surprised by her thoughtful inquiry. "I...have."

When she was gone, Romano inhaled deeply, settling the uncertainty he'd felt since the church's representative had taken his leave. Knowing the truth had made him angry at first. Then reality overwhelmed him, and he knew he could not hold the keep over Mariella any longer. What his grandfather had done was inexcusable. He had taken advantage of a weak baron just to lay claim to prime land. Had his father known this all along?

Needing to occupy his mind to keep from losing his senses over his sudden quandary, he picked up a candle by its holder and walked with purpose to the storage room. There was only one thing that could ease his troubled mind and heart. He set the candlestick on a low table and uncovered the lyre that was given to him on his seventh year by his mother's sister. The six-stringed instrument was the sole reason his father had sent him away at a young age to live with other nobles, to train in the ways of a soldier. His sire believed only women were suited to music. Making matters worse, Romano had a good, solid voice and often put words to the music he composed. No one knew his secret, save for Giorgio, who was loyal to a fault. He'd never tell another soul of his predilection.

He sat on a stool and positioned the lyre on his lap. As he strummed, he closed his eyes, thinking of naught but the ocean's waves breaking over the shore. Slowly, his tension ebbed like water over sand. Romano hummed while formulating words in his mind. The song settled in his heart, urging him to sing about a secret love. Mariella's face floated in the darkness, a bright image that lightened his mood and burrowed into his soul. He sang of passion, of a woman with beauty supreme. A woman who turned his head and his heart. When the song ended, Romano sighed like a man in love.

A smile shifted all the muscles in his face, and slowly he lifted his eyelids. Shock struck him with the force of a lightning bolt, hammering his heart fiercely against his chest. The woman of his dreams stood there, her features emotional. A tear perched on her bottom lashes, glistening in the candlelight.

"I ordered you to go below," he snapped, unduly angered that she disobeyed him. Mayhap more so that she discovered the secret he'd kept hidden these many years past.

She stepped into the room, her serene mood turned by his unkindly tone. "I brought up wine, thinking you might enjoy a goblet before retiring."

Her eyes repeatedly flicked to the lyre then back to his eyes. He was an idiot to speak to her with anything but kindness. Especially now that he knew the truth about the keep. He had yet to figure out what he would do about it. And now, he was burdened by a secret that could destroy him in the eyes of his army. Should they discover his penchant for music...

"I thank you." He rose and wrapped the lyre with the fine linen in which it had originally been given to him. Awkward silence ensued. He could threaten her to ensure she kept her new found knowledge to herself. Yet he would be twice the idiot for holding his own knowledge about the keep. It seemed she held the advantage on all accounts.

"You...play beautifully," she said, uncertainty in her voice.

He nodded his gratitude. That she did not ridicule him meant more than she could know. "I trust you will say naught to anyone?"

"I'll not."

"I fear my reputation will suffer."

"How so, my lord? There is no shame in a man who plays and sings as well as you."

Romano smiled. Perhaps she saw no shame in it, but he knew others would not agree. "I cannot risk—"

She boldly touched her fingers to his lips, silencing his fear. "Your secret is safe."

Kissing her fingers, he turned her palm to his lips. Her shiver rippled through him, enticing his desire into awakening. He led her into the bedchamber. "I wish to retire, Mariella. My head aches," he lied.

"Shall I fetch a cool cloth to ease the ache?"

Groaning inside, Romano desperately fought the urge to pull her to his chest, to ravage her lips, to caress her body in places no man had ever roamed. She was the only cure for any ache he suffered from. Instead, he replied, "Sleep is all I need."

"As you wish, my lord." She turned toward the door. "I will go below to have my meal."

She hesitated. Something troubled her mind, he could see, but for whatever the reason she held it in. He thought she frowned, yet it was so slight he wasn't sure. Finally she walked out of the chamber, leaving him confused and painfully aroused.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Mayhap I should rethink what I am doing," Mariella said to Rene, both alone in the food storage room.

"Now that you know the truth, mayhap you should confront the baron."

Mariella stared aghast at the girl. "Know you many who would confront a baron? I am a mere servant," she said, repeating what Giorgio and Agora had told her when first she came to Castello DiSanto.

"You are the daughter of a baron," she pointed out.

"A ruined baron. Naught was said after my grandfather lost the duel. I fear the Rizzoli family lived in disgrace thereafter."

"Still, the keep is yours by family birthright. Faith, all the land surrounding it is, too. No matter that the baron's grandfather built this castle and the surrounding town, the land was not his."

"All I care about is the keep." She wrung her fingers together. "Think you I should return to the keep?"

"And leave the baron? No, Mari. He will be most unhappy. I'll wager he will come after you. Do you not see the way he looks at you?"

She saw it, but she refused to think about what it meant. He had been gone many, many years. A man as virile as he would look at any pleasing wench with lust in his eyes. "The true facts cannot be changed, no matter how the baron views me. The keep belonged to my great-grandfather, and I intend to live in it until I take my last breath."

A noise outside the door caught their attention. Mariella hushed Rene and tip-toed toward the door. As she peeked around it, she found Agora retreating. Damn the woman.

Rene came up beside her. "Think you she heard?"

"I do." Now what was she to do? Would the woman go directly to the knight? "I must stop her."

In the great hall, Mariella caught up with Agora. "I'll have a word with you."

Agora stopped. "You cannot talk to me in that manner, servant whore."

Her demeaning words dribbled off Mariella's back. She refused to let Agora's jealousy distress her. "Think of me as you wish, but I'd ask that you not reveal what you overheard to the knight."

"Why?"

Why, indeed? She should let the woman inform the knight. With her knowledge of the truth out in the open, perhaps he'd relinquish his hold over her and release her to the keep for eternity. But then, she realized, she would suffer that eternity without the knight. *Gesu*, where she was once decisive, she was now fickle with her emotions.

When Agora turned for the stairs, Mariella gripped her arm. "I implore you to keep this to yourself."

Agora twisted out of Mariella's hold and in doing so, swiped the back of her hand across Mariella's cheek. Instant warmth surfaced. So did something more—Mariella's ire. She slapped the woman in return. Agora shrieked and reached over Mariella's shoulder for her braid, yanking on it.

She'd had enough. No woman dared to strike her, ever, and Mariella fought back, knocking Agora to the floor with a solid fist to her chin. She had never heard a woman scream as shrilly as Agora did. She sounded like a swooping hawk. Before the *signora*'s bearings returned, Mariella pounced, straddling Agora's hips and grabbing her flailing arms.

"I shall kill you," Agora threatened, fatiguing Mariella's shoulders with her constant thrashing.

"I know not what I have done to you, but you cannot treat me like a --"

"Whore!" a male voice thundered from across the hall.

Both Mariella and Agora ceased and stared at the knight, his hands curling into fists. He appeared annoyed yet amused. His eyes bore into Agora's prone form.

"Signorina Rizzoli is not a whore. You, however, would do well to apologize to her, else I'll feed you to my soldiers, many who have yet to appease their long abstinence from female companionship." He cleared his throat as his gaze slid to Mariella. "*Uccellino*, she cannot stand if you continue to sit on her."

Jumping to her feet, Mariella breathed deeply to rid her body of the tension gripping tightly. She flung her braid over her shoulder, knowing it was a frayed mess. Her appearance was the last thing on her mind, though, and she eyed the knight's inclined head and raised brows.

"I applaud your resilience, Mariella."

It wasn't until he started across the floor that Mariella noticed the merchant who followed him. Agora's loud gasp bit at her curiosity. The knight's sneering smile drew out her confusion.

"I see you recognize Signor Robolini," he said, not at all in a kind tone.

Agora nodded but held her wary silence. In her eyes, Mariella saw fear.

"Shall I bid him to reveal the truth about you? Or do you prefer to speak it on your own?"

Her features pale, Agora's smugness fled. She no longer wore the haughty air of a woman of means or station. When she tried to speak, naught came out of her opened mouth. The knight spoke for her.

"My sire sought you for your *services*," the word spoken as harshly as a curse. "He paid you well, it seems, but you were not content with your role. When you came to him with the babe, you convinced him it was his. My sire did not trust you, so he never took you to wife, even though you begged him."

The woman stood as stiff as a block of stone as she bit into her lower lip. Mariella feared she would make it bleed.

The knight glared at her. "Signor Robolini runs the inn you used to lay with the string of men who paid your price. How did I find him, you ask?" he mocked, obviously taking great pleasure in making her uncomfortable, showing her how defeat felt. "It seems your reputation was a poorly kept secret. Apparently my sire threatened anyone who spoke of it, for what reason I cannot say. Simply put, you have no ties to Castello DiSanto."

"My son --"

"He is my father's son. I recognized it the moment I looked upon him, though at first I denied it. But you will never be his mother."

"You cannot take my son away from me," she begged, throwing herself at his mercy. The false display disgusted him.

"Leave now before I toss you in the dungeon and let you rot."

"By virtue of the boy, I have every right to remain here," Agora tried.

"Your right was terminated the day I arrived home. Think you I have not seen how little you interact with the child? I have noticed the scornful looks you cast upon him when you think no one is looking. I have talked with the servants, all of them, and they relayed what I already suspected."

Agora erected her head high and fixed her features in an emotionless mien. "Keep the brat. I do not need him to survive. He was naught but a nuisance."

Horried by her admission, Mariella barely held back the tears flooding her eyes. She could not believe a mother felt that cold and uncaring toward her own flesh and blood. The woman was an evil beast. She deserved to rot in the dungeon, even though Mariella doubted the knight would follow through with the threat. She saw the loathing in his eyes, but she knew he could never banish any woman to such a long, agonizing death.

Two guards came forth. From where, Mariella could not say. She had not noticed them until they flanked Agora.

"You will be taken to the convent in Florence."

"No, I'll not go. I'll not live the life of a nun."

His brutal smile gave Mariella the chills.

"You will. And you'll never lay with another man again. A just punishment for a woman who uses her body for deceit and greed."

Agora did not go quietly. The tall, burly guards dragged her out into the yard, her shouts traveling through the closed doors.

The knight wiped a trickle of tears from Mariella's cheek, startling her. "What will you tell the boy?" she asked. "Surely he will miss his mother."

"He has been raised by one servant or another since his birth. He will be better off without her."

Mariella silently agreed.

To the merchant, the knight said, "I thank you for your courage in stepping forward. Had it not been for you, I would not have discovered the woman's ploy so soon."

After the man left, Mariella learned the entire story. "But who told her you had died in battle?"

He shrugged. "She was a clever one, believing her son would inherit DiSanto land upon the death of my sire. My resurrection stabbed a hole through her plan."

She should be grateful it did, but there was the matter of the keep, of which the knight had yet to reveal what he had learned. Dare she bring it up now? How long would he hang on to the truth? she wondered. Her thoughts broken by his wandering finger along her cheek, she held her breath, praying he'd not kiss her. Her fragile mind would embrace him without hesitation. When he smiled and walked away, she released her breath on a sigh.

What do you want, Mari? What do you truly, truly want? The keep? Or the knight?

Was she courageous enough to choose?

* * *

Night wrapped Mariella in loneliness as she peered out the window of her bedchamber. She had returned to the keep after the knight's evening meal, praying he would not notice her absent until morning. She had turned down his bed, their routine the same each night. After playing the lyre in the private room off his chamber, he turned in, even if she wasn't in her pallet. He knew she often remained below well into the night to speak with Rene. At least he allowed her that and was not so demanding of her time. But because he hadn't shared with her what he knew about the keep, she could not stay at Castello DiSanto. She could not face him without wanting to shout out that she was aware how his grandfather came to possess the old castle and built the new one.

Mentally tired, Mariella leaned back against the wall and toyed with the ribbon hanging down the center of her pale linen nightdress. It amazed her how both confusion and anger intertwined her feelings, all because of one man. With the barony in her family's history, she was equal with Baron DiSanto. Well, perhaps not honorably equal. After all, her grandfather died in disgrace at the bidding of his weak father. If her heart hadn't betrayed her...

The soft swish of the door opening broke Mariella's scrutiny of her life. Lorenza, bless her heart, promised to come up before retiring for the night to make certain she was all right. But when she looked across the room, Mariella's breath caught in her throat. She could not believe her eyes.

The knight entered, cautious but terribly handsome. He wore a rust tunic and riding boots, his hair disheveled from the ride over. His expression cheerless yet hopeful, she wondered about the reason he sought her out at the keep. Perhaps he came to tell her the truth. Unless he was there to continue the lie. Her heart beat heavily, very close to the surface, and she feared she'd not be able to control her emotions.

"Think you I would not notice you were gone?" he posed, neither angry nor gentle.

"I prayed you'd not notice until the morrow."

His grunt sounded irascible. "What was your reason for leaving me?"

Leave him? Did he truly believe she would remain at his castle, reminded every day how his family had shamed hers? More was his neglect to confess the truth.

"It was for the best, I think." She did not want to argue. To her dismay, she wanted to become lost in his strong arms and taste those lips that thrilled her with its kisses. She repeated, "It was for the best."

"For you?" He took a heated step forward but, for some reason, stopped himself.

"If that is what you believe."

"Mariella, do not be coy. Speak the truth."

"Mayhap it is *you* who must speak the truth."

Genuinely confused, he shook his head. "What truth?"

Her hands fluttered upward in a gesture of frustration. She asked him to speak the truth. Perhaps it was time she did, too. "I know about the keep and how my great-grandfather lost it." She glanced down for a brief moment. "I overheard your conversation with the man from the church."

She wished he didn't look so taken aback by her admission. Of a sudden he smiled. Just what was he about?

"I am duly chastised, *uccellino*. It seems I have been less than honest with you, and for that I apologize. My reason for holding it back is honorable, I think."

His eyes kept flicking to her nightdress. At last he lost the battle and stared at her as if he was looking at a king's feast set out before him. She glanced down, startled to find her garment illuminated by the moon's light, revealing her outline almost completely. She reached for a quilt lying on her bed and tossed it about her.

"You were saying..."

He cleared his throat, but the damage was already done. The tell-tale sign revealing he enjoyed what he saw was ill-concealed behind his belted tunic. Mariella trembled with excitement, as she had that night she seduced him.

“Learning about the keep turned my thoughts upside down.” He stepped closer until he was a short distance away. “You see, I feared you might believe I asked because it was the only way for me to obtain the keep.”

“Asked what?”

Frustration turned his breathing ragged. He wiped his palms against his tunic, all the while watching her taking in his strange behavior. He was nervous, she realized.

“I would ask you to be my...” A deep breath. “My...” A hard swallow.

“My lord baron knight, you have my curiosity locked in your hand. Or should I say mouth? Please tell me.”

When he captured her hands in his, she couldn't imagine what caused his to turn cold and damp. “Would you consider becoming my...wife?”

Mariella's knees turned weak, and the pounding in her heart intensified. He asked her to marry him despite his fear she would believe he did so solely to regain the keep. No, she'd not believe he was an underhanded man. He had not the keep in mind. Instead, he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

Tamping down her excitement, she said, “I did not think any man dared want me because I am well past marriageable age.”

“I care not about your age. All I know is, I love you and my heart will never leave me alone if you say no.”

Her smile built slowly. “Only your heart, my lord?” She dropped the quilt and juted her hip against his lower body, reveling in his groan when she brushed the hardened ridge there. “Mayhap there is more to your desire to marry me?”

He spread her loose hair over her shoulders, admiration keenly evident in his expression. It was the first time he saw her wealth of wavy red curls unbound. Of a sudden, he enveloped her in his arms. Oh, how comfortable she felt, engulfed by his natural body heat. He searched her eyes.

“You have not given me your answer.”

She gave him a naughty smile instead and stepped out of his embrace. “Before I do, I would bid you to do one thing.”

A cautious cloud skimmed his gray eyes. “Which is?”

“Seduce me.”

Disbelief etched his features.

"You heard me, my lord. So get on with it. I am old enough. Dare you keep me waiting, I fear I shall turn white-haired."

"Loose-tongued wench," he teased. A moment later he tore off his boots.

"No, no, that is all wrong. One boot and then the other. Is that not the way of seduction?"

Incredibly, Mariella did not blush from her bold command or from observing closely as his hands disappeared beneath his tunic to remove his hose. His legs were absolutely beautiful in a masculine way. She'd never get tired of looking at them. His belt followed and before he lifted the tunic over his head, he sauntered up to her.

"I must know, Mariella. Does your heart beat only for me?"

She circled her arms around his neck. "For as long as I live, my heart will be yours."

His kiss at her neck caused her to shiver. He chuckled, then swiftly tossed his tunic.

"Promise me one thing, *uccellino*."

She was too busy studying his perfect male form to promise anything.

"You will seduce me every night of our lives together."

Slyly moving her hand down his waist and hip, she gave him a devilish grin. "Your wish is my command, my lord."

She closed her hand around his erection. He moaned long and low, and in a heartbeat he freed her from the nightdress and positioned her beneath him upon her bed.

Naught mattered any longer. Not the past, and certainly not anything the DiSanto or Rizzoli men had ever done. There was a new beginning. Mariella knew she'd never want for anything as long as she was the woman of her knight's desire for eternity.



I've been writing romances since the early 80s when I was a stay-at-home mom to three daughters. It wasn't until the mid-90s that I became serious about the business of writing. I sold my first book, *The Lily and the Falcon*, to Kensington in 1999.

Other books I've published are *Foreign Exchange*, a romantic suspense set in Italy and the U.S. in 1970. It covered everything from a soccer-playing hero to the mafia, a CIA heroine, the FBI, Red Brigades Terrorists, and so much more. And in 2006 *Rebel Heart*, a historical western romance was released. It was a 2007 Aspen Gold Finalist.

I am partial to writing medieval romances set in Italy. I was born and raised Italian and know the culture well. *The Lily and the Falcon* was the first book of a four-book series set in 15th century Italy, which I hope will find a home soon.

I am currently a member of the San Diego Chapter of the Romance Writer's of America, RWA National, and PAN (Published Authors Network), along with many other online writing chapters.

My house is always full of laughter, especially when my grandchildren visit. I live in Southern California with my husband (my very own knight in shining armor) and three Rat Terriers. Although my husband is Czech, we are both active in the Order Sons of Italy in America. They have made him an honorary Italian.

For more information about me and my books, please visit my website www.jcortipetska.com. Or email me at info@jcortipetska.com.

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