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WINTERS

RETURN OF
HER ITALIAN DUKE

Rebecca Winters

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Return Of Her Italian Duke

Аннотация

The Duke she's never forgotten... When Gemma Rizzo applied to become pastry chef at the gorgeous Italian castello where she grew up, she never expected to get the job. But neither did she expect to find that her new boss was silver-eyed billionaire Vincenzo Gagliardi – the man who left her broken-hearted! Her first instinct is to run, but when Vincenzo finally reveals the devastating truth of what caused him to flee eleven years before, Gemma must decide if she can trust the haunted man she never stopped loving...

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The Billionaire's Club

Meet the world's most eligible bachelors...

by Rebecca Winters

For tycoons Vincenzo Gagliardi, Takis Manolis and Cesare Donati, transforming the Castello di Lombardi into one of Europe's most highly sought-after hotels would be more than just a business venture; it was a challenge to be relished!

But these three men, bound by a friendship as strong as blood, are about to discover that the chase is only half the fun...as three women conquer their hearts and change their lives forever.

Return of Her Italian Duke

Available now!

And look out for Takis's and Cesare's stories, coming soon!

Return of Her Italian Duke

Rebecca Winters



www.millsandboon.co.uk

REBECCA WINTERS lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. With canyons and high alpine meadows full of wildflowers, she never runs out of places to explore. They, plus her favourite holiday spots in Europe, often end up as backgrounds for her romance novels, because writing is her passion, along with her family and church. Rebecca loves to hear from readers. If you wish to email her, please visit her website at www.cleanromances.com.

To my darling daughter, Dominique,
a wonderful romance writer who has an editor's
instinct and insight to keep her mother's writing
on track and believable. She, too, is a Dumas lover.
We're both Francophiles at heart.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Castello di Lombardi, ten years ago

AT TWO IN the morning, Vincenzo Gagliardi, newly turned eighteen, quickly dressed in jeans and a hoodie he pulled over his black hair. The long sleeves covered the bruises on his arms. He could feel the welts still smarting on his back and legs as he slid his pack over his shoulders. Then he looked around his room one more time, glancing at the bed.

A vision of Gemma, the woman who'd been entwined in his arms there the night before, wouldn't leave his mind. After the pleasure they'd given each other despite his wounds, and the plans he'd envisioned for their future, it killed him to think he had to leave her at all. But the difficulties with his father made his flight necessary. Worse, he couldn't tell her where he was going or why. It was for her own protection.

Once his father, the acting Duca di Lombardi, started looking for him, he'd interrogate everyone, including Gemma, and he would be able to tell if she was lying or not. If the girl he'd grown up with from earliest childhood knew nothing about his disappearance, then his father would sense it and have to believe her.

Arrivederci, Gemma, his heart moaned. *Ti amo.*

Making sure no one saw him, he hurried through the fourteenth-century castello to Dimi's room in the other tower. His cousin had left his bedroom door open. Closer than brothers, they'd been planning Vincenzo's disappearance for a year.

Dimi was waiting for him. "You're late and must go now! I've been watching from the parapet. The guard with the dog won't be walking past the entrance for another seven minutes."

"This is it, cousin. Remember—when I'm established in New York, I'll contact you. Look for the phone number through an ad in the help wanted of *Il Giorno's* classified section. Be sure to call me on a throwaway phone."

Dimi nodded.

"It won't be long before you turn eighteen. I'll wire you money so you can join me. And as soon as I reach my destination, I'll phone our grandfather so he won't worry." Both boys were the grandsons of the cancer-stricken Emanuele Gagliardi, the old Duca di Lombardi, who no longer could function and verged on death.

His cousin's eyes teared up. "Che Dio di benedica, Vincenzo."

He tried to clear his throat. “God be with you, too, Dimi. Promise me you’ll keep an eye on Gemma.”

“You know I will.”

Vincenzo hated this situation that took him away from her, but there was no going back. He thanked his cousin for his sacrifice, hating their gut-wrenching separation and the horrible position he’d been put in. But they both agreed the danger was too great to do anything else.

As they hugged hard, Vincenzo realized that he could barely see through the tears. The deep well of shame and pain because he hadn’t been able to protect his mother was something he would have to carry for the rest of his life. Gemma was better off without him.

Because of Dimi’s loyalty, no one would ever know where he’d gone. This was the way it had to be.

Now that Vincenzo had been forced to cut himself off from the world he knew, the need to make money had taken hold of his life and had become his *raison d’être*.

* * *

Gemma lay in bed, wide-awake, at six in the morning, reliving the moments she’d spent with Vincenzo the night before last. When she’d heard he’d suffered injuries from a fall off his horse, she hadn’t been able to resist slipping up to his tower bedroom to see if he was all right.

Despite his physical pain, they’d tried to love each other until he’d told her she needed to get back to her room. Gemma had

wanted to stay the entire night with him and couldn't understand why he'd been so insistent she leave. She'd wanted to lie in his arms forever.

It was painful to have to tear herself away from him. After making sure no guards were watching, she slipped down the winding staircase at the back of the castello to reach the rooms where she and her mother lived behind the kitchen.

Yesterday after school she hadn't seen him at all, and she feared his injuries were worse. If she didn't spot him in the back courtyard today after she got home, she'd go up to his room again tonight to find out why.

He was such an expert rider, it was hard to believe he'd been hurt so badly. While she suffered over what had happened to him, she heard a knock on her bedroom door. "Gemma? Get up and get dressed, then come in the main room quickly!"

She didn't normally get up until six thirty to start getting ready for school. Alarmed by the concern in her mother's voice, Gemma did her bidding.

When she emerged from the small room, she saw a sight she'd never forget. Vincenzo's father, the acting Duca di Lombardi, stood there while three policemen searched their rooms off the castello kitchen.

He and Vincenzo bore a strong likeness to each other, but there was all the difference in the world between them. The duca's stare at her was so menacing, she shuddered.

Her mother grabbed her hand. "The duca wishes to ask you

a few questions, Gemma.”

He'd never talked to her personally in her life. “Yes, Your Highness?”

“Where's my son?”

She blinked. “I—I don't know what you mean,” she stammered.

“If you know anything, you must tell him, Gemma.”

“I know nothing, Mamma.”

The police reappeared, shaking their heads. The duca took a threatening step toward her. “My son is missing from the castello, and I believe you know where he's gone.”

Gemma froze. Vincenzo was gone? “I swear on my faith in the Holy Virgin that I have no idea where he would be.”

His face turned a ruddy color. He shot a fiery glance at Gemma's mother, who crossed herself. “She's lying! Since you can't get the truth from her, I insist you leave the premises immediately and take your baggage with you.” Gemma flinched. “I'll make certain you're never able to get another job again!”

He wheeled around and left. The police followed and shut the door.

Gemma ran to her mother and hugged her hard. Both of them trembled. “I swear I don't know anything about Vincenzo. I swear it, Mamma.”

“I believe you. Start packing your bag. I'll do the same. We have to get out of here as soon as possible in case he comes back. I'll call for a taxi from the kitchen. We'll leave for the train station

and go back to Florence.”

Fifteen minutes later they assembled in the kitchen. The other cook and her daughter, Bianca, Gemma’s best friend, were there, too, with their bags. The duca’s fury knew no bounds. As they hurried out of the service entrance at the back of the castello to wait, the duca’s words rang in her ears.

She’s lying! Since you can’t get the truth from her, you must leave the premises immediately and take your baggage you. I’ll make certain you’re never able to get another job again!

When the taxi arrived, Gemma climbed inside feeling as dead as last winter’s ashes.

New York City, six months ago

After Dimi had phoned Vincenzo during the night with news that had come close to sending him into shock, he made calls to his two best friends and asked them to come to his Manhattan penthouse above his office ASAP.

Once arrangements were made, he told his assistant he wouldn’t be in the office today and didn’t want to be disturbed for any reason. Within two hours they’d both shown up using his private elevator.

The ultra-contemporary apartment suited Vincenzo perfectly. He liked the modern art on the white walls and the floor-to-ceiling windows that let in the light. Up here there were no dark reminders of the past. Here, he could breathe. Or he’d thought he could, until Dimi’s phone call.

“Thanks for coming so fast,” he said in Italian. “I’m just

thankful you were available.”

Cesare nodded. “You made it sound like life or death.”

“It is to me.”

His friend Takis eyed him curiously. “What’s going on, Vincenzo?”

“Something that will surprise you. I’ll tell you over breakfast. Come to the dining room.”

Once they sat down and started to eat, Vincenzo handed them each a photograph of the massive Castello di Lombardi. “You’re looking at the former residence of the Gagliardi family. From that family, two hundred years ago, sprang the first illustrious Duca di Lombardi, an important political figure in that region of Italy.”

They stared at the photo, then looked at him in confusion.

“Why am I showing you this?” He read their minds. “Because there’s more to me than you know. What I’m about to tell you could cause you to distrust me. You would have every right to walk out of here and never look back.”

“Tell us what?” Cesare asked in total bewilderment.

“I haven’t been completely honest about myself. You know me as Vincenzo Nistri, but my full name is Vincenzo Nistri Gagliardi. Nistri was my mother’s maiden name.”

Takis blinked. “So you’re full-fledged Italian? For some reason you remind me of one of my Macedonian friends.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Cesare said. “Maybe Eastern Europe.”

“Is that so?” Vincenzo grinned, amused by their honesty. “Not that I know of. The castello you’re looking at was my home for the first eighteen years of my life.” And the woman I left behind there so cruelly is still the only girl I ever loved, though there’ve been women since. “If a great tragedy hadn’t happened to my family—one that caused me to flee—I would have taken over as the next Duca di Lombardi upon my father’s death.”

There was no question that he’d stunned his friends. Neither of them said a word. They kept staring at him as if he were an alien being speaking an unknown language.

“Let me tell you a story so you’ll understand everything. My father and uncle did very bad things, evil things. At one point I realized my life was in danger.”

When he’d given them details, he said, “The old duca, my grandfather, died nine years ago, leaving the way open for my father and uncle to bring down the house of Gagliardi. To start paying their debts, they sold off family treasures, including other properties that had been in the family for hundreds of years. Inevitably they let go the staff who’d served our family faithfully.

“Then a month ago my father was riding his horse through the forest behind the castello in a drunken rage. The horse reared and my father fell, breaking his neck. That left my uncle, Alonzo in charge.

“He has just been sent to prison, where he’s now serving a thirty-year sentence for manslaughter, drunkenness, embezzlement and debt in the millions of euros. The family

has now disintegrated, and the authorities have closed up the castello.”

His friends shook their heads. “How could such a thing happen to a powerful family like yours?” Takis asked.

“There’s one word for it. Corruption. Absolute and truly terrible. The family coffers had been raided for so long there was nothing left but staggering debt they’d accrued. They were like two bad seeds.

“My maternal grandparents died two years ago, and the only remaining family members on my father’s side besides my imprisoned uncle are my cousin Dimi, who is like a brother to me, and his mother, Consolata. They live in a small palazzo in Milan given to her by her grandmother before her marriage to my uncle.”

It was the only piece of property that neither Alonzo nor Vincenzo’s father had been able to lay his hands on at the end.

“Dimi lives there quietly with her because she’s in a wheelchair, suffering from dementia, and needs care.” He eyed them directly. “Can you forgive me for omitting all of this until now?”

“Si—” both men said in unison. Takis’s brows met. “Your life was in grave danger.”

“But that’s in the past. Now I’m faced with something I hadn’t imagined, and I wanted to discuss it with you.”

Cesare’s solemn gaze played over him. “Tell us.”

“The castello is now in receivership. I swore to God I would

never return to Italy, but the thought of my heritage being sold to some foreign potentate to help the slipping Italian economy is anathema to me.

“My cousin Dimi is particularly concerned. He has an eye on what’s happening everywhere. Both Italy’s Villa Giulia museum in Rome, built by Pope Julius III, and the nine-hundred-year-old Norman palace in Palermo, the seat of former kings, are soon to be on the list to be sold off by the government, too.

“In view of such a frightening prospect, I wondered if you might like to go into business with me. Dimi will assist behind the scenes. Not only will my cousin and I be able to preserve our own family heritage, we’ll transform the castello into a glorious hotel with a restaurant that could be the toast of Europe. It would mean the three of us would have to put our assistants in charge of managing our businesses when we’re not in the country.”

After a pronounced silence, both men let out cries of excitement. For the rest of the day the three of them brainstormed.

“Now that we’ve talked things out, there’s one favor I must ask. I intend to be the silent business partner in this venture and prefer to remain anonymous because of the family scandals.”

Their solemn acknowledgment of his request warmed him and he knew they’d honor his request.

“Now, you can imagine that when word gets out that the castello has been sold and turned into a resort by two businessmen from the US, the press will be all over it. Dimi will

send me the necessary information and put you in touch with the contact person to get the ball rolling.

“If we do decide to go into business together, I’ll expect you two to do the negotiating. Naturally I’ll supply the money needed so we can get started on the renovations right away.”

Cesare smiled. “The duca’s return.”

“No, Cesare. I don’t want my title mentioned. That’s not for public consumption.” He couldn’t escape the title he’d inherited by being his father’s son, but in time he intended to renounce it legally through the court system. And I’ll find Gemma if it kills me. Over the last ten years, no search had turned up any evidence of her.

“Understood.” Cesare eyed him seriously. “When we first met at university, I always knew there was a lot more to you, but I couldn’t put my finger on it and didn’t dare ask for fear of insulting you.”

“Now it’s all making sense,” Takis admitted. “Your English is too perfect, and you’re far more sophisticated and knowledgeable than anyone else I know.”

“Your friendship has meant the world to me. Let’s hope for success in our new venture.”

Takis sat back in the chair. “Edmond Dantes had nothing on you, Vincenzo Gagliardi.”

Florence, Italy, present day

The bulletin board of the Florentine Epicurean School of Hospitality and Culinary Arts listed the latest career openings

across four continents for their recent graduates to investigate.

At twenty-seven years of age, Gemma had finally received her long-awaited certification with the much-coveted first-place blue ribbon, and she hurried down the corridor toward the office. Everyone wanted to apply for the most prestigious position posted. She didn't know what her chances were, but it didn't matter. Her hard, grueling years of schooling were over, and she would find a position that guaranteed her a new life so she could prove herself.

She wanted to pay back her mother's family, who'd taken them in after they'd been thrown out of the Castello di Lombardi. Her relationship with Vincenzo years ago had put her family in such dire straits, it had ruined her mother's career. Gemma felt the responsibility heavily, because she hadn't heeded her mother's warnings that a commoner didn't mingle with royalty. But those days were behind her.

With students gathered around the bulletin board, it was hard to get close enough to write down the information. Later the lists would be put online, but she was too impatient and took pictures of the various announcements with her cell phone.

Her best friend Filippa Gatti, who'd gone through pastry school with Gemma, had the same idea. They made plans to talk later before she hurried off. Gemma found a bench farther along the corridor and sat down to study everything but gave up because she couldn't concentrate with so much noise.

Once outside, she got in her old blue car and headed back to

her aunt's apartment two miles away. Her mother's sister owned the hundred-year-old Bonucci family bakery and ran it with her married daughter. When Gemma and her mother had fled to Florence, her aunt had let them live in the apartment above the bakery.

Her aunt was goodness itself and had put her mother to work. She had also helped Gemma get a scholarship to attend cooking school, because her mother's funds were so low. Her cousin was wonderful, too, and they all got along.

Once she had started culinary school, Gemma had helped out in the bakery every day after classes. The culinary school required ten years of apprenticeship. After high school she'd begun her training there. Now that she'd graduated, it was important she start paying her aunt back for letting them live there and helping to get them on their feet after being kicked out of the castello.

Today she dashed up the back stairs to the door off the porch. Gemma couldn't wait to call her mom and aunt and tell them she'd been chosen the top graduate in her class. After they'd shown such faith in her, Gemma was thrilled that her hard work had paid off.

But of course, it would happen that her mother and aunt had just left to go on a well-deserved vacation to the United Kingdom with friends, their first in years. They wouldn't be back for three weeks, because their trip included England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Such good news from the school had filled Gemma with

joy. She would have to phone her mamma, Mirella, immediately.

Now that she'd received her certification, she was anxious to find a fabulous job and move out. She planned for her mother to go with her. They'd find a small, affordable apartment. Her mother could stop working and enjoy her life while her daughter earned the living.

After grabbing her favorite fruit soda from the fridge, Gemma sank down on the chair at the small kitchen table and phoned her mamma. Frustrated when she got her voice mail, Gemma asked her to phone her back ASAP because she had exciting news.

Next, she scrolled through her photo gallery to the information she'd recorded on her cell. To her utmost disappointment, none of the eighteen openings for pastry chefs were in France, the place where she'd had her heart set on working.

Both the French and the Italians thought they produced the finest chefs. As her mother and aunt had told her, because she was a woman, she'd have an even harder time breaking into a top five-star restaurant in either country. Women chefs still struggled for equality. One day she would get a position on the Côte d'Azur. But for now she needed a job right away!

Trying to manage her disappointment, she studied each opening one at a time: five in Spain, three in England, one in Liechtenstein, two in Australia, three in Japan, three in Canada, one in Italy.

Since it couldn't be France, nothing else thrilled her, but she studied the requirements for the various openings.

It wasn't until she came to the last posting, from Italy, that Gemma was shaken to the core. She thought she'd read it wrong. The shock had her jumping up from the couch. She read the words again, attempting to quell the frantic pounding of her heart.

Location: Milan, Italy. Fourteenth-century castello and former estate of the deceased Duca di Lombardi, Salvatore Gagliardi. Grand opening of the five-star Castello Supremo Hotel and Ristorante di Lombardi, July 6.

July 6 was only four weeks away. She read on.

Résumés for executive chef and executive pastry chef are being accepted. See list of requirements. Only those with the proper credentials need apply.

Gemma came close to fainting when she thought of Vincenzo. The fact that he'd disappeared without even saying goodbye had caused an anger in her that, even now, she was still trying to suppress. He'd told her he was in love with her and that one day they'd find a way to be married.

After he'd vanished, she'd felt so used. What a fool she'd been to believe he could love the daughter of a cook! How naive of her to think the duca-to-be would consider an alliance with an underling like Gemma. In her dream world they'd been equals and anything was possible. But once Vincenzo's father had tossed her and her mother out like a heap of garbage, she'd received the wake-up call of her life. It had shaken her world forever.

As she read the announcement again, something twisted

painfully inside her. The castello, an icon over the centuries that had been her home until the age of seventeen, had now been turned into a hotel and restaurant. She tried to understand how such a thing could have happened to the family with its succession of duchi for over two hundred years.

Gone was their birthright and traditions. Vincenzo had disappeared along with his family. Last year she'd heard on television that Vincenzo's father was dead. And soon after that Dimi's father had been sent to prison for fraud. Beyond that there'd been no more news.

Now she was horrified to think the castello had been put up and sold for its commercial value in an increasingly mercenary world. Gemma considered it a form of sacrilege.

No doubt every new graduate would apply there first, but they didn't have a prayer of being hired. Only the most famous chefs throughout Europe and elsewhere would be allowed an interview at such a magnificent and famous landmark. Many considered Italy to be the vortex of gastronomic delight in the world. The competition would be fierce.

Even so, she was going to apply.

After her failed relationship with Paolo, she realized she needed to draw a line under the past. Until she discovered what had happened to Vincenzo and why, she knew in her heart she'd never be able to move on with her life.

If by some miracle she only made it to the first interview before being rejected, maybe she'd be able to find out where

Vincenzo had gone. What had caused the demise of the Gagliardi family? So much had been hushed up in the press.

Pushing those thoughts aside, for the rest of the day she emailed her prepared résumé to Milan, Valencia, Barcelona, London and Vaduz in Liechtenstein. For some reason she couldn't attach her picture, but it was too late to worry about that now.

Filippa called to tell her she'd applied for all three jobs in Canada. She would have preferred to go to the States, but Canada was the next closest place with openings. Gemma wished her luck and told her what she'd done. They promised to keep each other updated on what happened.

The next day she started receiving emails back and learned that the positions in Vaduz and Valencia had already been filled. Barcelona and London were still open. To her satisfaction, they'd sent her a specific day and time to report for a personal interview.

But it was the email that came after lunch from the castello that almost sent her into cardiac arrest. She was told to report there at noon tomorrow! And to please let them know immediately if she couldn't make it.

Gemma had thought, of course, that being a new graduate, she wouldn't have been considered. Something on her résumé must have caused them to give her an opportunity.

Thank heaven her mother wasn't in Italy right now. Gemma needed to see this through before she told her parent anything. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt her mamma. But for

Gemma's own emotional health and progress, she had to do this! It might be her only chance in this life to find out about Vincenzo. If she didn't follow through, she knew she'd always regret it.

With hands trembling, she sent an email to let them know she'd be there at the correct time. If she left Florence within the hour, she could drive to the village at the base of the castello today and find a room for the night. That would give her time tomorrow to get ready before the interview.

Gemma phoned her cousin to let her know that she was leaving for a day or two to go job hunting. She made no mention that her destination was the castello. Her cousin had been so hurt for Gemma and her mother, she would have tried to persuade her to avoid more pain and not go. But this was something she had to do.

Without wasting any time, she showered and packed a suitcase that included her laptop. After dressing in jeans and a blouse, she set off on the three-hour drive to Milan full of questions that might get answered after all this time. It would be a trip of agony and ecstasy, since she'd never once been back.

* * *

By seven in the evening, she'd arrived in the busy city and took the turnoff for the village of Sopri, where she'd gone to school with a few children of the other estate workers. Even after all this time, Gemma knew where to find a pensione with reasonable rates.

But sleep didn't come well. She tossed and turned for hours.

Memories of Vincenzo and the night they'd been together in his bedroom kept her awake. Lying in his arms she'd felt immortal, but he hadn't let her stay with him all night, something she'd never understood.

How she'd loved her life at the castello with him! For years since his disappearance she'd tried to discover his whereabouts, but he'd vanished as if into thin air. Over time it finally sank in that she hadn't been good enough for him. That's what her mother had been trying to tell her without putting the painful message into actual words. Gemma believed it now!

When she wasn't hating Vincenzo, she feared that something terrible had happened to him. The possibility that he might have died was insupportable to her. Combined with her pain over the loss of Vincenzo was her outrage for what his father had done to her and her beloved mother. The great, cruel Duca di Lombardi! There were times when the memory of that morning still tormented her.

Once they'd moved to Florence, she'd never heard anything about Vincenzo or Dimi. Where had his cousin gone? She'd once hoped that if she could even find Dimi, she'd get answers to all her questions. But it was as if the Gagliardi family had been erased from life. It was too strange... She missed Dimi. He'd been such a wonderful friend all those years ago.

Now she was going back to the place where she'd known such joy...and pain. What if by some stretch of the imagination she got the job? How would she feel? How would her mother feel

to realize her daughter had graduated with honors from the top cooking school in Italy and was going to make it despite what the duca had done to them?

Wouldn't it be the height of deliciousness to be hired there, of all places on earth? Such sweet revenge after being kicked to the gutter.

* * *

Gemma was relieved when morning came. After washing her hair and showering, she dressed in a peach-colored two-piece suit, wanting to look her best. At ten she ate breakfast at a trattoria before leaving for the castello ten minutes away. She'd planned to get there early enough to look around and ask questions. Surely someone would be able to tell her about Vincenzo.

For him to disappear on her was a betrayal so awful, she hadn't been able to put her trust in another man for years. Even after she'd starting dating, the memory of that horrible time when it became clear he'd never be back still haunted her nights.

It had taken until a year ago for her to have her first serious relationship with a man. After a month of dating, Paolo wanted to sleep with her, but she couldn't. Her heart wasn't in it. She explained to him that in another eight months she'd be graduating and looking for a position, hopefully in France. There could be no future for them. She had to follow her own path.

After breakfast Gemma opened the car window and breathed in the warm June air as she drove past the familiar signposts,

farms and villas toward the massive Castello di Lombardi.

The ocher-toned structure, with its towers and crenellated walls sprawled over a prominent hilltop, had its roots in ancient times. So many nights she and Vincenzo had walked along those walls with their arms around each other, talking and laughing quietly so none of the family or guards would see or hear them.

Closer now, cypress trees bordered her on either side of the winding road. Memories came flooding back. Because of Vincenzo, she knew all about its history. The remains of a Romanesque church standing in the inner courtyard dated back to AD 875. But the castello itself had been built in the fourteenth century to protect the surrounding estate from invasions.

Many owners had possessed it, including the House of Savoy. By the mid-eighteen hundreds it had become the residence of the Gagliardi family. Although it was the first Duca di Lombardi who was considered illustrious, as far as Gemma was concerned that right would have belonged to Vincenzo. That was, until he'd plunged a dagger in her heart by disappearing.

The visitor parking beneath the four flights of zigzagging front steps held no cars. Her breath caught to see the profusion of flowers and landscaping done to beautify everything. New external lighting fixtures had been put in place. At night it would present a magnificent spectacle to guests arriving.

After taking it all in, she drove down a private road that wound around to the rear entrance where in the past the tradesmen used to come. Beyond it was a large parking area that she remembered

had been used by the staff.

There were a dozen vans and trucks, plus some elegant cars, clustered in the enclosed area around the door. From the front of the castello the entire place had looked deserted, but that clearly wasn't the case.

Once she'd gotten out of her car to walk around, a male gardener planting flowers called to her. "The lady is lost, perhaps?" he asked in Italian.

She shook her head. Anything but. "I'm here for a job interview."

"Ah? Then you must go around to the front. The office is on the right of the entrance hall."

"Thank you." It seemed that the day room she remembered must have been converted into an office. She could never have imagined it. "Tell me—do you know why the castello was sold in the first place?"

He hunched his shoulders. "No lo so."

With her hair swishing against her shoulders, Gemma nodded and walked back to her car, realizing she'd get nothing from him. Her watch said eleven forty-five. She might as well arrive a few minutes early to show she was punctual. She backed her car around, retracing her short trip back to the main parking lot, where she stopped the car and got out.

How many hundreds of times had she and her childhood friend Bianca—who'd had a crush on Dimi—bounded up these steps after getting off the school bus looking for Vincenzo and

his cousin?

They would enter the castello through a private doorway west of the main entrance and hurry down the corridor to the kitchen. Once they'd checked in with their mothers, they'd run off to their hiding place in the back courtyard, where hopefully the two Gagliardis would be waiting.

To her surprise the old private entrance no longer existed. The filled-in stone wall looked like it had been there forever. Gemma felt shut out and could well believe she'd dreamed up a past life.

But when she entered through the main doors, she had to admit that whoever had undertaken to turn this into a world-class resort had done a superb job of maintaining its former beauty. Many of the paintings and tapestries she remembered still adorned the vaulted ceilings and walls on the right side of the hallway.

The biggest difference lay in the bank of floor-to-ceiling French doors on the left. They ran the length of the long hallway she used to run through on her way to the kitchen. Beyond the mullioned glass squares she could see a gorgeous dining room with huge chandeliers so elegant it robbed her of breath.

On the far side of the dining room were more French doors that no doubt opened on to a terrace for open-air dining. Gemma knew there was a rose garden on that side of the castello. And though she couldn't see it from here, there was a magnificent ballroom beyond the dining room to the south.

She was staggered by the changes, so exquisite in design she

could only marvel. Whoever had taken over this place had superb taste in everything. Suddenly she realized it was noon and she swung around to report she was here.

The enormous former day room had been transformed into the foyer and front desk of the fabulous hotel, with a long counter, several computers and all the accoutrements essential for business. She sat down on one of the eighteenth-century sage-and-gold damask chairs with the Duca di Lombardi's royal crest and waited to see if someone would come.

Just as she was ready to call out if anyone was there, she saw movement behind the counter that revealed an attractive brown-haired male, probably six foot two and in his late twenties. Strong and lean, he wore trousers and shirtsleeves pushed up to the elbows. When his cobalt-blue eyes wandered over her, she knew he'd missed nothing.

"You must be Signora Bonucci."

CHAPTER TWO

GEMMA CORRECTED HIM. "I'm Signorina Bonucci."

"Ah. I saw the ring."

"It was my grandmother's." Gemma's mother had given it to her on her twenty-first birthday. Her grandmother had also been a great cook, and the hope was that it would bring Gemma luck. Now Gemma wore it on her right hand in remembrance.

As for the name, Bonucci, that was another story. Once Gemma and her mother had left the castello, Mirella had insisted Gemma use her maiden name. She'd hoped to be able to find

work if the duca couldn't trace them through her married name, Rizzo.

One corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. "Now that we have that straightened out, I'm Signor Donati, the one who's late for this meeting. Call me Cesare." With that accent the man was Sicilian down to his toenails. "Thank you for applying with us. Come around the counter and we'll talk in my office."

She got up and followed him down a hallway past several doors to his inner sanctum, modern and in a messy state. Everything about Cesare surprised Gemma, including the informality.

"Take a seat."

Gemma sat down on one of the leather chairs. "I have to admit I was surprised that you would even consider a new graduate."

He perched on the corner of his desk. "I always keep an open mind. I had already chosen the finalists and the field was closed, but when your résumé showed up yesterday, it caught my eye."

"Might I ask why?"

"It included something no one else's did. You said you learned the art of pastry making from your mother. That was a dangerous admission and made me curious to know why you dared." He was teasing her.

"It was dangerous, I know." For more reasons than he was implying, but the duca was dead now. "To leave my mother from my résumé would make me ungrateful."

She felt his gaze studying her. "For you to mention her means she wasn't just an average cook in your eyes."

“No. She came from a family of bakers. To me, her pastry will always be the best.” Gemma owed her mother everything after her sacrifices.

The man cocked his head. “It shows you’re willing to give credit where it’s due. But being the daughter of a cook doesn’t always make the daughter a cook, no matter the genes nor how many classes at school.”

“No one is more aware of that than I am, but I would be nothing without her. She helped me go to cooking school in Florence.”

He folded his arms. “The best in Italy, where you received the highest award during your ten year apprenticeship there. It’s a stringent education, but the most prestigious culinary schools require that much training to turn out the best cooks. She guided you well. Bravo.”

A compliment from a man who knew the culinary business well enough to be in charge of staffing this new hotel came as a complete surprise.

“If I hadn’t been born her daughter, I would never in this world have decided on a career that keeps you on your feet all day and night, that will never pay enough money and that is unfair to women chefs in general. In truth I’m shocked you allowed me this interview, even if you are exceptionally open-minded.”

She shouldn’t have said it, but she’d spoken without thinking. Incredibly he burst into laughter.

“Signorina, you’re like a breath of fresh air and have won

yourself one chance to prove if there's genius in you. Report to me at ten in the morning and I'll put you to work making what you do best."

Gemma stared hard at him. "You're serious..." Was it really possible?

His brows lifted. "When it comes to cooking, I'm always serious. You'll be sharing the kitchen with another applicant who is hoping to become the executive chef. All the ingredients you need will be provided, and you'll both have your own workspace. When you're finished, you will leave. Any questions?"

Yes. She had a big one, but now wasn't the moment. It had to be another test to see how well two different chefs got along under this kind of pressure. "None, Signor."

"Bene. When your pastry has been sampled by the people in charge tomorrow evening, an opinion will be made. The next day you'll be phoned and informed of their decision. Please see yourself out."

Now she was scared. She'd heard back from her mother last night and had been able to tell her about receiving the top marks for her certification. Her mother and aunt had been overjoyed. Gemma had told them she planned to apply at quite a few places for work, but she'd left out the position offered at the castello.

There was no need for her mother to know about it since Gemma had no real hope of getting it. Instead she'd asked them about their trip and they'd talked for a long time. Her mother had sounded so happy, Gemma hadn't wanted to say anything to take

away from her enjoying the only trip she'd had in years.

* * *

Deep in painful thoughts, Vincenzo strode down the portrait-lined castello hallway toward his deceased grandfather's private dining room. Even after being back in Italy for a half year, it was still hard to believe this had once been his home.

All Vincenzo could think about was Gemma. Over the last ten years, he'd paid an Italian private investigator to look for her to no avail. For the six months he'd been in Lombardi, he'd doubled the search. Vincenzo's guilt over how his unexplained disappearance must have hurt Gemma beyond description had tortured him from the beginning. It matched his fear that he would never catch up to her again.

Though Dimi had promised to keep an eye on Gemma for him, fate had stepped in to change Dimi's life, too. The day that Vincenzo's father had gone on a rampage over his disappearance and had searched the countryside for him with the help of Dimi's father and the police, Dimi had realized the danger in staying at the castello. That very morning he'd left with his mother and taken her to her family's property in Milan, where they'd be safe and out of the way.

On his own, Dimi had searched for Gemma, but that path had led nowhere, either.

The thought filled Vincenzo with such profound sadness, gripping him to the point he couldn't throw it off. Echoes and whispers from a time when he'd known real happiness with

Gemma haunted him and made his disconnect with the past even more heart wrenching.

His friends looked up when he entered. They must have heard his footsteps on the intricate pattern of inlaid wood flooring. Before he sat down at the oval table, Vincenzo's silvery-gray eyes—a trait of the Gagliardi men—glanced at the wood nymphs painted on the ornate ceiling.

Twenty-eight-year-old Vincenzo found them as fascinating now as he'd done as a little boy. One of them had always been of particular interest, because Gemma could have been the subject the artist had painted.

“Mi dispiace essere in ritardo. I was on the phone with Annette.”

The savvy real estate woman he'd been involved with before leaving New York had wanted to plan her vacation to be with him for the opening. Deep down he knew she was hoping for a permanent arrangement. But since Vincenzo had stepped on Italian soil, memories of Gemma had had a stranglehold on him. He knew he wasn't ready to live with anyone, let alone get married.

Maybe after the opening he'd be able to relax and give it more thought. He enjoyed Annette more than any woman in a long time. But he had work to do and had told her he would call her back when he had more time to talk. The disappointment in her voice when he said he had to hang up because he was late for a business dinner spoke volumes. It was the truth.

Cesare smiled at him. “Non c’è problema.”

Greek-born Takis grunted. “Maybe not for you, Cesare, but I didn’t eat lunch on purpose, and now I’m famished.”

Vincenzo nodded. “I held back, too. Tonight is the night we make decisions that will spell the success or failure of our business venture. Let’s get started.”

“Just so you know, a fourth pastry chef applicant has created a sampling of desserts for us this evening.”

“A fourth?” Vincenzo frowned. “I thought we were through with the vetting process.”

“I thought so, too, but this one came in at the last minute yesterday with amazing credentials, and I decided to take a chance.”

Takis groaned. “So we have to eat two sets of desserts?”

“That’s right, so don’t eat too much of any one thing,” Cesare cautioned them.

On that note Vincenzo used his cell phone to ring for dinner. Tonight was the final night in their search to find the perfect executive chef and executive pastry chef for their adventure. The right choices would put them on the map as one of the most sought-after resorts in the world.

They’d narrowed the collection of applicants down to three in one category and now four in the other, but they were cutting it close. In one month they would be opening the doors and everything would have to be ready.

Their recently hired maître d’, Cosimo, came up on the newly

installed elevator and wheeled in a cart from the kitchen with their dinner. If tonight's food was anything like the other two nights, they were in for a very difficult time choosing the best of the best. The battle between the finalists was fierce.

For the next half hour they sampled and discussed the main course and made the decision that the French applicant would become their executive chef.

With that accomplished, Vincenzo rang for the desserts. Cosimo brought in the tray of delicious offerings from the third pastry chef.

"Remember," Cesare reminded them, "we have one more round of desserts from the fourth pastry chef to sample." He passed them a dish of water crackers. "Eat a few of these now so you'll be able to appreciate what's coming." They drank tea with the crackers to help cleanse their palates.

Cosimo wheeled in the last offerings of the night. As he placed the tray on the table, Vincenzo took one look at the desserts and thought he must be dreaming. All of them were Italian, and there were so many of them! They made up the parts of his childhood. He couldn't decide what to try first.

Unaware of his friends at this point, he started on sfogliatelli, his favorite dessert in the world, layered like sea shells with cream and cinnamon. When he'd eaten the whole thing he reached for the puffed dome of sweet panettone, the bread his family had eaten on holidays. When he couldn't swallow another bite, he lifted his head. His friends were staring at him like he'd lost his

mind.

Takis nudged Cesare. “I believe we’ve found our executive pastry chef.”

“But first we must get Vincenzo to a hospital. He’s going to be sick.”

Their smiles widened into grins, but he couldn’t laugh. All these desserts were too good to be true and tasted like the ones prepared by Gemma’s mother years ago. But that was impossible!

He eyed Cesare. “Who made these?”

“A graduate from the Florentine Epicurean culinary school.”

Vincent shook his head. “I need to know more.” At this juncture his heart was thumping with emotion.

Their smiles receded. Cesare looked worried. “What’s wrong?”

“Tell me this person’s name.”

“Signorina Bonucci. I don’t remember her first name. It’s on her résumé in my office.”

The name meant nothing to Vincenzo. “How old is she? Early sixties?” Had Mirella, Gemma’s mother, seen the advertisement and applied for the position?

“No. She’s young. In her midtwenties.”

How could anyone reproduce desserts identical to Mirella’s unless she knew her or had worked with her? If that were true, then perhaps she could tell him Gemma’s whereabouts!

“What’s going on, Vincenzo?”

For the next few minutes he told them about one of the cooks at the castello years ago. “Her pastry was out of this world. She had a daughter who was a year younger than me. We grew up together on her mother’s sweets. She was my first love.”

“Ah,” they said in a collective voice, clearly surprised at another one of his admissions.

“I have no idea what happened to either of them. In fact, over the years I’ve spent a large sum of money trying to find them, with no success. I want to meet this applicant and find out how she happens to have produced the same desserts.”

He jumped up from the chair and hurried out of the room to the elevator at the end of the hall. Once on the main floor, they walked through the lobby and congregated in Cesare’s private office. His friend pulled up the résumé on his computer for Vincenzo, who stood next to him to read it.

Seeing her first name nearly gave him a heart attack.

Gemma Bonucci

Age: 27

Address: Bonucci Bakery, Florence Top student in the year’s graduating class of pastry chefs.

He was incredulous. His search had come to an end. He’d found her!

Vincenzo had known her as Gemma Rizzo. So why Bonucci? So many questions were bombarding him, he felt like he’d been punched in the gut.

“This must be Mirella’s daughter, but there’s no picture of

her.”

“It wasn’t attached to her application,” Cesare explained, “but her cooking is absolutely superb.”

“So was her mother’s. I can’t comprehend that she was in the kitchen earlier cooking our dessert.”

“You look a little pale. Are you all right?”

Vincenzo eyed Cesare. “I will be as soon as I get over the shock. You don’t know what these last ten years have been like, trying to find her and always coming to a dead end...”

“Do we agree she’s our new executive pastry chef?” Takis asked.

Vincenzo looked at both men. “Don’t let my overeating influence you in any way. I have a terrible Italian sweet tooth, but we need to consider the various preferences of all patrons who will come through our doors. I’m sorry that you haven’t been able to vote your conscience because of my behavior.”

“It wasn’t your behavior that decided me,” Cesare insisted. “That was the best tiramisu I’ve ever eaten.”

“Don’t forget the baba and the baby cannoli,” Takis chimed in. “Every dessert was exquisite and presented like a painting. When the guests leave, they’ll spread the word that the most divine Italian desserts were made right here.”

“Amen.” This from Cesare. “But Vincenzo, did you have to eat all the sfogliatelli before we could sample it? Cosimo had to bring us more. It was food for the gods.”

It was. And the lips of the loving seventeen-year-old girl

Vincenzo had once held in his arms and kissed had been as sweet and succulent as the cinnamon-sprinkled cream in the pastry she'd prepared for this evening.

“Takis will make the phone calls now and tell our two new chefs to come to the office at noon for an orientation meeting.” Cesare's announcement jerked Vincenzo out of his hidden thoughts.

“I'm glad the decisions have been made. As long as I'm in your office, I'd like to see the résumés of the other pastry finalists.” It was an excuse to take another look at Gemma's.

“Be my guest,” Cesare murmured. “Those desserts finished me off. I may never eat again.”

“You're not the only one. I'm going to my office to make the phone calls.”

But for the stunning realization that tomorrow he would see Gemma—the chef who'd turned them all into gluttons—Vincenzo would have laughed.

He walked around the desk and sat down in front of the computer screen to look at it. Her training had been matchless. She held certificates in the culinary arts, baking and pastry, hospitality management, wine studies, enology, and molecular gastronomy. She'd won awards for jams, preserves, chocolate ice cream. Mirella's chocolate ice cream had been divine.

The statement she'd made to explain her desire to be an executive pastry chef stood out as if it had been illuminated. I learned the art of pastry making from my mother and would like

to honor her life's work with my own.

His eyes smarted as he rang Cesare.

“Ehi, come va, Vincenzo?”

“Sorry to bother you. What was it about Signorina Bonucci's résumé that decided you on allowing her to compete? I'm curious.”

“You know me. My mamma's cooking is the best in the world, and I never make a secret about it. When I read about her wanting to honor her mamma's cooking, I decided it was worth giving her a chance. On a whim I told her to report to the castello. I did the right thing in your opinion, non e vero?”

He closed his eyes tightly. “You already know the answer to that question. If you'd ignored her application, I doubt I would ever have found her.” His throat closed up with emotion. “Grazie, amico.”

“I'm beginning to think it was meant to be. Before I hang up, there's one thing you should know, Vincenzo.”

“What's that?”

“I didn't tell you before because I didn't want you or Takis to think I was biased in picking her for personal reasons.”

His pulse sped up. “Go on.”

“The signorina is beautiful. Like the forest nymph on the dining room ceiling you were staring at tonight. You know, the one leaning against the tree?”

Yes. Vincenzo knew the one and felt his face go hot. One night when he'd been kissing Gemma, he'd told her she reminded him

of that exact nymph painted in the room where Vincenzo had spent many happy times talking to his grandfather. Cesare had noticed the resemblance, too.

“A domani, Cesare.”

“Dormi bene.”

Vincenzo turned off the lights and headed for his old bedroom in the tower. No renovations had been made here. Guests would never be allowed in this part of the castello. It was too full of dark memories to open to the public.

He removed his clothes and threw on a robe before walking out on the balcony overlooking Sopri at the foot of the hillside where he'd run away. Where was she sleeping tonight? Down below, near to where she'd once attended school? Or in Milan?

Vincenzo knew her deceased father's last name had been Rizzo. Everyone called her mother Mirella. He'd heard the story that her husband, who worked in the estate stables, had died of an infection in his leg. After that, Mirella moved up from the village where they'd lived before his death and was allowed rooms in the rear of the castello with her little girl, Gemma.

One of the cooks who'd lived there, too, had had a child of the same age, named Bianca. Vincenzo couldn't remember when he and his cousin Dimi had started playing with them on the grounds of the estate. They were probably four and five years old.

Strict lines between social classes were drawn to prevent them from being together, but like all children, they found a way. He remembered his eighth birthday, when Gemma entered the

courtyard where he and Dimi had been practicing archery with his new bow. She gave him a little lemon ricotta cheesecake her mother had baked just for him. He'd never tasted anything so good in his life.

From that day on, Gemma found ways to slip sweets to him from the kitchen. They'd go to their hiding place at the top of the tower and sit outside, straddling the crenellated wall while they ate his favorite sfogliatelli. When he looked down from that same wall now, he realized they could have fallen to their deaths at any time.

An hour later he went to bed, but he couldn't turn off his thoughts. When he'd had to leave Europe in the dead of night, he hadn't been able to tell Gemma why and hadn't dared make contact with her. Days, weeks, months and finally years went by, but she'd always lingered in his memory.

To think that while he'd been in New York buying and selling businesses and building new companies over the last decade, she'd been in Florence working heaven knew how many hours, day in and day out, before ending up back at the castello as executive pastry chef. Incredible!

CHAPTER THREE

GEMMA HAD BEEN in a state of disbelief since last night. A Signor Manolis, the business manager, had called to tell her she'd been hired to be the executive pastry chef at the Castello Supremo Hotel and Ristorante di Lombardi! She was to report to him at noon today.

Things like this just didn't happen, not to a new culinary graduate. But it was, and it meant she didn't have to leave Italy. By some miracle she was going back to where she'd known years of happiness...being friends and falling in love with Vincenzo before that dreadful moment when she'd learned of his disappearance.

Don't think about that terrible morning when the duca destroyed your life and your mother's. That part of your life was over a long time ago. Let the memories go...you're the new pastry chef. And now it's possible you can find out what happened to Vincenzo. One of her new bosses had to have information.

But a huge new problem beset her.

How was she going to tell her mother about this? Her dear mother, who was in England and knew nothing yet.

Gemma flew around the room in a panic. How would her mamma react to this after all the many sacrifices she'd made for her daughter over the years? Would it be like pouring acid on a wound? Or could Gemma make her see that this might just be the way to turn the ugliness around?

And what greater triumph than for Mirella's daughter to arrive at the castello as executive pastry chef? Gemma's mother had been hired by the old, beloved duca, Vincenzo's grandfather. Now Mirella's daughter would be following in her footsteps. Best of all, her mother wouldn't have to leave Italy and could stay in Florence if she wanted to. These thoughts and more filled her mind while she tried to convince herself this could work.

After showering, she decided to wear her other suit, consisting of a navy skirt and a short-sleeved white jacket with navy piping and buttons. Though she swept her wavy hair back with a clip when she cooked, today she left it to hang down to her shoulders from the side part.

Being five foot seven, she mostly wore comfortable flats for cooking. But on this special occasion she wanted to look her best and slipped on strappy navy heels. Tiny pearl studs were the only jewelry she wore besides her watch and her grandmother's ring she would always wear in remembrance of her.

Gemma didn't need blusher. Excitement had filled her cheeks with color. With a coating of frost-pink lipstick and some lemon-scented lotion, she was ready and walked out to her car without her feet touching the ground.

After stopping at the same trattoria for breakfast, she headed for the castello. Four days ago she'd been upset that she couldn't apply for a position in France. But she hadn't known what was awaiting her at the former ducal residence in Milan.

Yesterday she'd worked alongside another applicant who was hoping to be chosen executive head chef. The five-star hotel he'd come from in Paris was renowned throughout Europe. To be chosen to work here meant he was the best of the best.

Gemma had taken French and English all the years she'd ever gone to school. Her mother had insisted on it, which had turned out to be advantageous for her. Some of her classes at the culinary school had been taught by various French experts, and

she'd been thankful she didn't have to struggle with the language.

After they'd been introduced, she wouldn't say Monsieur Trudeau was rude. If anything he treated her as if she were invisible. No chitchat. Naturally he was shocked that such a young woman was vying for the pastry chef position. She'd ignored him and had concentrated on the pastries she'd planned to make.

The newly renovated kitchen with state-of-the-art equipment had been a dream. If only her mother could have worked under such unparalleled conditions...but that was in the past. Perhaps her mother could come to the castello and see the way it had been renovated. And instead of the ducal staff and family, Gemma would now be making pastry for the jet set, royals, celebrities and dignitaries of the world. She still couldn't believe it.

This time when she drove up to the front of the castello, she saw a black Maserati parked there. Maybe it belonged to the business owner with the strong accent who'd phoned her. Gemma got out of her car and hurried up the steps. When she entered the lobby of the hotel, she saw a fit, dark blond man, maybe six foot one and thirtyish, waiting for her behind the counter. His hazel eyes swept over her.

“You must be Signorina Bonucci. I'm Takis Manolis.”

“How do you do?” She shook his hand. The signor was another good-looking man, dressed more formally in a suit and tie. This one had rugged features and probably needed to shave often. He spoke passable Italian and reminded her of some of the guys

she'd met at school, possibly Turkish or Greek.

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