

CHAPTER ONE

Courtly Love



Silvano da Montacuto was not just young, handsome and rich. He was young, handsome, rich and in love. As he rode on a grey stallion along the main street of Perugia one evening in high summer, a hawk on his pommel and his hound pacing behind him, he could hardly have been happier.

Silvano was sixteen years old, slim and elegantly dressed, with a feather in his hat and a silver dagger in his belt – he was his mother's darling only son and his father's pride and joy. And he was on his way to the house of Angelica, his beloved.

But first he was to meet his best friend, Gervasio de' Oddini, to show him his new hawk, Celeste, and ask his advice about how to pursue his courtship of Angelica.

'Like a hunter,' Gervasio was sure to say. 'Study your prey, learn her habits, accustom her to your presence by seeming harmless and kind. And then, when she is tame and off-guard, you pounce!'

'But I *am* harmless – at least I mean her no harm,' Silvano would say.

Gervasio would just smile. He was a year older than his friend and liked to play the world-weary older man, experienced with women, accomplished in the arts of courtly love as

well as proficient in the skills of hunting, fighting and running up debts at the local inns.

The Eagle was where they were to meet this evening, their favourite inn near the main square of the city, the Platea Magna. Silvano tied up his horse outside but took the hooded Celeste in on his wrist, Ettore the hound padding after them. The inn was an ideal place for a private conversation, full of loud-voiced drinkers and smoky with candles.

Silvano made out his friend through the gloom and threaded his way past wooden tables, stepping over outstretched legs. Gervasio was drinking with a man Silvano had never seen before, who slipped away silently as soon as he approached. Gervasio called for more wine and the two young men moved to a table in a quieter part of the room.

'Nice bird,' said Gervasio, admiring Celeste's barred breast feathers.

'From Bruges,' said Silvano casually, while bursting with pride. 'She was trained in Brabant, of course.'

'Of course,' said Gervasio ironically. His own hawk was a small hobby, a lesser bird, but all his father could afford as his family were minor nobility and Gervasio was the sixth and youngest son.

Silvano was the only son and heir of the wealthy Baron Montacuto, and his clothes, his horse and now his new peregrine all declared his status to the world. The friends spent a good ten minutes discussing the qualities of the falcon, who had been a birthday present, before getting on to the subject of the fair Angelica.

'If only a certain lady could be induced by soft words and compliments to bend to your will like Celeste,' said Gervasio, at last changing the subject to an area in which he did feel

superior to his friend.

Silvano fetched a deep sigh in agreement. He was quite happy to discuss Angelica all night long but did not feel any confidence that she really knew of his existence. She was married to a wealthy sheep farmer, much older than her, who bought her fine dresses and jewels and perfumes, but that was not the problem. In Silvano's eyes she was as much above him in beauty as he was above her in station and he could not believe she would ever look kindly on his devotion, even if she were free.

'Write her a poem,' suggested Gervasio, looking keenly at his friend. He was much more cynical than Silvano and couldn't see how a well-dressed and good-looking boy with money and a title to inherit could fail to impress a young woman married to a middle-aged farmer with a paunch and a wart at the side of his nose.

And there was no doubt that Silvano was good-looking. His light brown hair was cut so that it fell straight to just under his jaw and his eyes were a silvery-grey with long dark lashes, both features inherited from his Belgian mother. The Baronessa Montacuto was delicate in face and form and her fragility, which had caused her to lose three other sons and a brace of daughters before they drew breath, gave to her surviving boy a grace of movement and a fineness of feature that fitted his destiny perfectly.

He rode, fenced, hunted, sang like a dawn bird and could read Latin almost as well as a monk. But his future would not lie in the Church. No, Silvano would be Baron Montacuto, with a household of servants, the rents from substantial lands north of Perugia and a beautiful Baronessa to raise his brood of children. Only she would not be Angelica. The sheep

farmer's wife would be fat before she was twenty-five, but Silvano would have moved on by then.

Gervasio's mouth curved as he thought of her ample charms. 'Write her a poem,' he said again. 'She'll be impressed.'

A faint pink flush had tinged Silvano's prominent cheekbones.

'You've done it already, haven't you?' laughed Gervasio. 'I knew it! Come on, let's hear it.'

Silvano dug into the purse at his belt and produced a piece of parchment, much scraped and criss-crossed with black ink. He pretended not to be able to read his verse properly but actually he knew the words without the parchment:

"Twice wounded lies my bleeding heart
And suffers still its secret pain.
Amor himself shot the first dart
My lady's eyes then aimed again.
The god has left for Heaven's gate
Who now his work on earth has done
For me to heal it is too late
Unless to mercy she should come.
One glance would mend the second scar
Or could if it were soft and kind.
One rose but thrown from out her bower.
The first I'll bear till end of time.

'That's all there is so far,' said Silvano, his cheeks now burning.

'That should do the trick,' said Gervasio, trying to keep a straight face.

'You really think she'll like it?'

'She will if you read it to her in your most pleading voice

and flutter your long eyelashes at her. In fact,' said Gervasio, getting to his feet, 'let's go and find her now and strike while the iron is hot.'

Angelica lived in the west of the city, near the Porta Trasimena, a short walk from the inn. The two young men walked past the vast bulk of the Church of San Francesco, with its friary alongside it. It held a special horror for Gervasio, who feared that he might one day be sent to live there as a friar, once his father had died and his brothers had shared out the patrimony. And he had no taste for poverty or obedience, let alone chastity.

Two young friars, in their dingy grey habits, walked barefoot out of the great church as they passed and Gervasio grimaced at the sight. He hurried Silvano along the road west.



Angelica sat at the window of her husband's town house feeling bored. Tommaso was off negotiating sheep prices in Tuscany, but she refused to set foot in the old-fashioned stone farmhouse outside Gubbio, even when he was not away. Buying the fashionable palazzo in the city had been part of their marriage contract. Old Tommaso brought the wealth and substance to the match; Angelica the beauty. Her family were well aware that she had nothing else to offer: no name or breeding, no particular skills or accomplishments, just her perfectly oval face with the springy blonde curls that framed it and her perfectly rounded limbs.

Tommaso wanted an heir; his first wife had been barren and he had waited patiently until she died. Angelica wanted a nice house, servants and pretty clothes to wear. In her

parents' home she had been little more than a servant herself and she had sworn not to have hands as coarse and red as her mother's. So the town house had been purchased and for the first year of her marriage Angelica had enjoyed buying furniture and hangings for it almost as much as she had revelled in the silks and lace and fur she could wrap around her pampered body, according to the season.

But now she was bored. The expected – the bargained for – baby had not arrived. There had been the beginnings of one but it ended in pain and blood a few months into its life and Angelica had used that as an excuse to keep Tommaso out of her bed for many months. And she was beginning to wonder if all the pretty clothes in the world could make up for having a short fat middle-aged man for a husband.

Angelica glanced out of the window and immediately turned pink with pleasure. There were two good-looking young men in the street below and she knew that one of them was in love with her.

Silvano looked up and saw her. She was dressed in a light blue gown with white muslin at the breast and she wore a double string of pearls round her throat. In his own throat his voice died and he knew that he could never recite his poem to her.

'You do it,' he hissed to Gervasio. 'You'll say it better than I will,' and he thrust the parchment into his friend's hand, turning away from the palazzo to hide his confusion.



'I won't, I won't, I won't!' said the girl, glaring at her brother. 'You can't make me!'

'I think you will find that I can,' said Bernardo. 'I am your brother and your guardian and, if I say you are to enter a convent, who will argue with me except yourself?'

Chiara was weeping with rage and fear. 'Then you will have to tie me up and take me there in a sack,' she spat. 'For no one will ever say I went there willingly!'

'If that is what I have to do, then I shall do it,' said Bernardo, quite unperturbed. 'There is no other choice. Father did not leave enough money for a decent dowry for you. The pittance that the Poor Clares are willing to accept as a donation would buy you no kind of husband. And you wouldn't want to be married off to a hideous old man, would you?'

Chiara stopped her raging for a moment. Could it really be that Bernardo was being kind and considerate in his way? But she knew his way of old and there had been little enough kindness in her life since their father had died six months ago. And not much before that.

'But why can't I stay here with you and Vanna?' she asked, subsiding into sobs. 'It is my home and I could help you with the children.'

'We've been through all this before,' said Bernardo wearily. 'I can pay a servant girl to do that for far less than it would cost to keep you in meat and wine and decent clothing.'

'Then let me eat bread and drink ale and wear homespun!' cried Chiara. 'Only don't send me away.'

'You are being ridiculous,' snapped Bernardo. 'I am not selling you into slavery. Many girls like you enter religious houses and live devout and useful lives. Why should not you?'

Because I am not without a family, thought Chiara. And I don't have a vocation. But she was too proud to beg for her

brother to show her some affection. She had been starved of that since the death of their mother when she had been a little girl just losing her milk teeth. Their father had been like his son, a man not given to tender caresses or shows of emotion. Chiara wondered fleetingly how her sister-in-law Vanna could bear being married to such a cold fish.

But she pushed the thought down along with her own feelings of rejection. She had been silent for some minutes and the tears were drying on her face. Her future as a nun stretched drearily out in front of her, empty of adventure or romance, and she felt deathly tired, as if she really had fought her brother physically and lost.

'I see you have no answer,' said Bernardo. 'That is settled then.'

He had won.



Silvano turned aside, biting his lip while Gervasio recited his verses to Angelica. They sounded banal now to his ears, and impossibly naïve, when said in Gervasio's light, slightly mocking voice, and yet he had filled them with all the passion in his heart while he was writing. Silvano couldn't wait to be properly grown up with a mistress of his own and a beard on his chin and some property to manage.

With his girlish features and slight body he was an easy target for his father's friends, who were all prosperous middle-aged men with chests like barrels and legs like tree trunks. Men of substance, who could drink all night and show no ill effects and get up at dawn to ride out hunting the next day. Yet Silvano was stronger than he looked and

fearless, and could wield the dagger he wore at his waist and a long sword when occasion arose. He just wished he could learn how to keep his feelings out of his face.

But what was this? Angelica was clapping her hands, her soft white hands, and laughing. She was saying that his poem was pretty. And now that he looked at her, he could see that she was picking a red flower from a pot on her balcony. True, it was a geranium and not a rose, which did not smell as sweet, but it sailed through the air gracefully enough, before being caught by Gervasio.

His friend handed it to Silvano straightaway, along with the parchment, indicating him as the poet. Did Angelica look a little disappointed? Silvano put the pungent flower in his hat and bowed to her with a flourish before putting the cap back on.

‘Come away,’ hissed Gervasio. ‘We must leave now. That’s the husband coming back.’

Tommaso was indeed toiling up the hill and Angelica’s expression told the friends that she was surprised and displeased to see him in equal measure. She would have much preferred to spend the sunset hour flirting with two young men. Now she would have to organise dinner for her husband and listen to him grumbling about the price of sheep. And if she were unlucky, later than night he would come to her room and slobber over her, ruining her complexion with his stubbly face. She shuddered.

As the two friends strolled back down the hill, the farmer lifted his cap to them and they, in a gesture that he took quite rightly as irony lifted theirs to him with a flourish. Nobles didn’t display much courtesy to farmers. Tommaso looked sharply at the flower in the younger man’s hat and thought he

caught a glimpse of a blue dress vanishing from the balcony of his house.



Sister Eufemia was in charge of the novices at the little convent in Giardinetto. It was a small community; in spite of what Bernardo had said to his sister, not many women entered the Order of the Poor Clares unless they had a real calling. The community at Giardinetto had only twenty nuns and three novices. Chiara would be the fourth.

‘This girl from Gubbio,’ said the Abbess to Sister Eufemia. ‘I doubt she has any real vocation.’

‘Didn’t the brother say she was a devout child, so racked with grief still for her dead father that she wanted to withdraw from the world?’ asked Eufemia.

‘I think the brother would have said anything to get her off his hands,’ said the Abbess drily. ‘But if we don’t take her in, he’ll find some other convent that will. And at least we can be kind to her. If she doesn’t seem fitted to the religious life, she can be a lay sister. Perhaps she’ll be useful in the pigment room.’

‘Well, Sister Veronica could certainly do with the help,’ said Eufemia. ‘You’d think those painters in Assisi *eat* the colours we prepare for them – Sister Veronica simply can’t keep up.’

‘We must not complain about that, Sister Eufemia,’ said the Abbess, in a tone of mild reproof. ‘It is all to the glory of the Blessed Saint Francis himself. It will be a wonder that brings many more pilgrims to Assisi when all the frescoes are finished.’

‘True, Mother,’ said Eufemia. ‘Nothing is too good for the Saint, God rest his noble soul.’ She crossed herself matter-of-factly as all the sisters did so many times a day they hardly noticed they were doing it. ‘But you know the brothers here have started their own pigment room? There will be work enough for both houses before the Basilica is complete.’

The Abbess looked out of her window: she was the only person in the house whose cell had one. The familiar outline of the friary just across the vegetable garden from the convent met her eye. Abbot Bonsignore had mentioned only recently that his house had agreed to take on production of pigments for the artists who swarmed over the Basilica being beautified in neighbouring Assisi. His new friar, Brother Anselmo, had the necessary skill and would be Colour Master. Abbess Elena had felt a momentary twinge of jealousy that her own convent would no longer be the only local religious house with a colour room; but, as she had just told Sister Eufemia, anything to the glory of Saint Francis could only be a blessing.

There was nowhere else in the whole of Italy where a Franciscan house and one of the Poor Clares sat so close together. Most Clares found it difficult to hear Mass the seven times a year they were bound to, but in Giardinetto, there was a friar free to come and celebrate whenever the sisters asked. And that friar was now Brother Anselmo.

The friary was the older foundation but the sister house had grown up next door when two women had decided together to renounce worldly life and came to the brothers for help. At first they lived in what was no more than an out-house of the friary and used the same chapel as the brothers, taking turns to say the Office, so that the sisters were always

half an hour later with their Hours.

But with time, more women wanted to join them and several had their own fortunes, which they used to build a proper convent and a small chapel of their own. In addition to their work on the land and with the poor people of the parish, they had specialised in the grinding of colours for the artists who were flooding into Umbria from Tuscany, to decorate the many new churches being consecrated.

The present Abbess was the great-niece of one of the convent's founders and she ran a peaceful house. But in the few weeks since she had received the visit of Bernardo from Gubbio, she had felt uneasy. This was the first time she had agreed to take a girl without having met her first. The three existing novices were quiet and obedient; someone less so could disrupt the serenity of the Poor Clares of Giardinetto.



Angelica lay wide awake and dry-eyed in the large bed, whose yellow silk hangings she had chosen so happily a few months earlier. Beside her, Tommaso snored with his mouth open.

'I cannot bear it,' she thought. 'Did God give me beauty just to waste it on a wild boar like that?'

She thought about the handsome young men and the poem, which she hadn't fully understood but which was full of the sort of pretty words she liked – flowers and wounds and love and sighs. Then she remembered what had just happened and a single fat tear trickled down her grazed cheek. It was like living in two different worlds and Angelica longed for a chance to escape from one to the other.