



Seduced

COLOURS
of
LOVE

KATHRYN
TAYLOR



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Andrew was right, I think, an hour later, standing in front of the buffet in the rear drawing room with a plate in my hand, considering which of the finger food delicacies on offer to fill it with. The conversation with Giacomo di Chessa really was very pleasant, and I now hope we get the contract even more than I did before.

I can easily imagine working with him — perhaps because he reminds me of my father in a lot of ways. The two of them don't look at all alike. Dad is a tall man who still has a full head of black hair — I inherited his hair colour. Superficially, he's nothing like the frail, sickly Italian. But they both have the same sadness in their eyes — although my father's has a different cause — and that makes me warm to Giacomo di Chessa a lot. I'm almost certain that we'll get on well — and it's a mystery to me why Andrew thinks this commission could be difficult in any way.

Unfortunately, I still haven't had a chance to ask him what he meant by his cryptic remark about our host. Andrew has gone to a lot of trouble to introduce me to the right people, but he's always getting tied up in some conversation or other. That's the cost of knowing so many people — and also the reason why I'm standing here at the buffet alone.

I couldn't wait for him any longer. The last time I ate was at midday. I grabbed a quick sandwich in one of those tourist cafés, while I was shopping for the dress. So I'm really hungry now and am glad there's such a wide selection of different foods: bruschetta with tomatoes, stuffed courgette flowers, prawn kebabs, *involtini* with aubergine and Parma ham, meatballs, little round Parmesan and pesto slices of toast — my appetiser plate is filling up and I can't stop. Luckily, I'm one of those people who can eat a lot without putting on weight. I've always considered that a blessing, and tend to make full use of it — not just today.

"Make sure you try the Roman *arancini* — they're the cook's speciality," the man next to me says suddenly, smiling at my surprised expression. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"You ... didn't," I hasten to assure him. "I was just lost in thought."

I observe him more closely, intrigued. He's a medium height man — I'm guessing he's around five foot ten — with dark brown, wavy hair that looks very well cared-for. And so does the man himself, in his immaculately fitted dark suit. He must be in his forties — and he's pretty good-looking. Well, not compared to Matteo Bertani, but then that's probably an unfair comparison.

"Thanks for the tip," I say, taking one of the *arancini* he recommended. He's still examining me from the side, I notice.

"You're Sophie Conroy, aren't you?" he enquires and I suddenly realise that the only reason he spoke to me in the first place was because he wanted to introduce himself.

“That’s right.” I give a slightly wry smile. “I assume Andrew Abbott mentioned my name?” It would have been nice if Andrew had detailed as much to me about whom I might meet here. It would have saved me a few embarrassing incidents if I’d been as well informed as the others.

“Yes, just now,” the man acknowledges. “Actually, it would be more accurate to say that he raved about you.” He gives me a friendly, perhaps slightly too eager, smile. But this doesn’t make me nervous, which is really nice, so I’m happy to smile back.

We’re silent for a moment while I consider whether I should ask him his name — but then, luckily, he realises that our acquaintance has been one-sided until now.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Lorenzo Santarelli, and I’m an art dealer. Although I don’t own an auction house like you, just a large gallery here in Rome.”

A *gallery owner*, I think, and out of interest I ask him where his gallery is located — in Tiburtino, right by the university, he tells me proudly — and what kind of art he exhibits. It turns out to be an eclectic mixture with an emphasis on young, unknown artists, mostly from in and around Rome, but also from other parts of Italy and Europe.

“I like to see myself as more of a patron than the kind of dealer focussed on keeping his profit margin,” he explains. I’m about to decide that he’s very self-important when he adds: “I’m sorry, that must have sounded terribly arrogant. I find myself in the fortunate position of not having to live off my earnings, so that’s easy for me to say.”

He smiles a little regretfully, but somehow I can’t shake the feeling that he’s saying all this to impress me. He wants me to know that he’s well off. The fact that he needs to emphasise it really is making me rethink my positive first impression of him. On the other hand, he invests his money in supporting gifted young artists, which is a very good thing. There’s nothing to object to, Sophie, I say to myself in trying to quiet the funny feeling that briefly rose up inside me just now. You’re just imagining things because you’ve already had one unpleasant encounter with a man this evening.

“That’s great, if you can afford it,” I answer in a friendly, neutral tone. “And I’m sure it’s a good investment, too. There’s been a clear trend toward modern art in the auction business, as well.” Which makes him another useful contact for me. “Besides, I imagine it must be exciting to get to view so many new works,” I add.

“It certainly is.” He reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a business card and holds it out to me. “If you’re going to be in Rome for a while, come and visit me at the gallery. I’d love to show you our exhibits.” He clears his throat. “Miss Conroy?”

“Oh, yes, of course — thank you very much!” I say with an apologetic smile, taking the card. I was distracted for a moment because Matteo Bertani has just entered the rear drawing room — like I said, the man is simply impossible to miss.

“Give me a call whenever you like, if you have time,” Lorenzo Santarelli says once more, looking around because he’s obviously noticed that I’m not giving him my full attention.

“I will.” I place my still rather full plate — I still haven’t had much of a chance to eat — down on the buffet table for a moment and open my clutch to slip the card inside. As I do so, my fingers come into contact with my smartphone, and I realise that it’s been ages

since I checked to see whether I have any new messages. I've probably received countless texts from my father by now. When he's alone with Mum there are often problems, especially not long after I've gone.

I immediately feel a pang of guilt and, although I know it's not polite, I take the mobile out for a moment and switch it on. One new message, it says on the display. My heart percolates but then calms down again when, after two clicks, I see that it wasn't my father who sent it, rather Nigel. I can guess what the text says — he's going to ask me once more if I arrived OK, because I haven't responded to his last message from this morning. But I don't have time to reply now, so I slip the mobile back into my bag.

When I look up again, an apologetic smile already on my lips, I stop dead, startled, because Matteo Bertani is walking up to Lorenzo Santarelli.

"Signore Bertani," my buffet neighbour greets him and the two men nod at each other. But I realise in mild astonishment that they don't have much joy for each other. That definitely doesn't look like friendship — or even polite acquaintanceship.

"Miss Conroy, may I speak to you in private for a moment?" Matteo Bertani asks.

I stare at his beautiful face in surprise, trying to read his expression. Actually, I don't want to be alone with him again, because he makes me so uncomfortable. But he asked politely, and as a polite Brit there's only one possible answer.

"Of course. Would you excuse us for a moment?" The last sentence is addressed to Lorenzo Santarelli, who is still smiling. Although his smile looks rather forced now.

"I have to be going anyway. It was very nice to meet you, Miss Conroy."

"Likewise," I reply watching him for a moment as he turns around and leaves. Then I take a deep breath and look up at Matteo Bertani.

But he's not looking at me; he's looking at my heavily-laden plate, which I'm holding in my hand again. I suddenly feel embarrassed that it's so full. I hastily indicate the bar tables with white slip covers that have been set up near the buffet to give people a place to eat. One of them is still free, and I would like to use it so that I don't have to balance the plate in my hand. I'm already nervous enough as it is.

"Shall we go over there?" I ask, proud of how calm my voice sounds. Then I just start walking, without waiting for his answer. He follows me, but a moment later, once we're standing at the table, he's still looking at my plate, with an amused smile on his face.

"I haven't eaten anything since midday," I explain, immediately feeling annoyed. That was unnecessary, I don't owe him any kind of explanation.

"Oh, go ahead, tuck in. It's very refreshing to meet a woman with a healthy appetite."

The way he puts it, it actually sounds quite positive, but my brain immediately starts searching for a negative undertone. Does he mean that I'm a glutton? He probably does. But I don't touch my plate. I can't. It's not even important any more. I can eat later, once this conversation with him is over and done with.

I stand up especially straight — it's probably a reflex, to combat the effect he has on me — and meet his gaze with outward calm.

"You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, I did," he says in his deep voice. "But perhaps I should warn you of something first."

I examine him suspiciously. “Of what? That I should keep my hands off Signore di Chessa’s artworks?”

I can’t suppress the remark because our previous conversation is still eating away at me. Matteo Bertani’s smile actually does look a little more contrite. At least it seems to, although I might be mistaken. You never know with this guy.

“No, it’s about Lorenzo Santarelli,” he says. “You aren’t to know this, but he’s a very controversial figure in the Roman art scene. Some people respect him, but at least as many don’t think much of him.”

It’s not hard to guess which group he belongs to. But I’m still astonished — not by the information itself, but by the fact that he felt obliged to warn me in the first place. And now I’m curious, too. “What has he done?”

Matteo Bertani’s facial expression becomes scornful.

“Nothing. At least, nothing he could be formally accused of. He’s just a phony. A wealthy man who was bored, so he decided to buy himself a gallery, in which to play at being the Mother Theresa of the art world.”

“That’s a very damning assessment,” I say, no longer surprised that the relationship between the two men is so frosty. “I assume Signore Santarelli knows what you think of him?”

Matteo Bertani shrugs his shoulders. “I’m not one of those people who keep their mouths shut for the sake of politeness. And in this case, it seemed appropriate to warn you. After all, you have a reputation to lose, Miss Conroy.”

At the last remark, my anger begins to build up again. “I had no idea you were so concerned about my reputation. Am I not in your bad books anyway, for having the wrong job and for flogging art?”

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” he declares, smiling at me with that irresistibly radiant, charming smile of his again. If this is how he operates at the university, no wonder the student numbers in art history have shot up.

But I’m certainly not about to succumb to his charms — he’s got a nerve, making a remark like that. I haven’t done anything that I’d need him to give me a second chance *for*. He should act for *me* to give *him* a second chance — but to be on the safe side, I contort my lips into a politely condescending smile instead.

“How nice of you. But, while we’re on the subject of second chances — this thing you accuse Signore Santarelli of — is it really that bad? If I understood correctly, you do something very similar yourself, invest your own money in art. Am I right?”

He clearly does not like this way of looking at things at all. His face immediately clouds over and his eyes, which were shining just a moment ago, are now flashing with anger. Good. It’s much better than that killer smile which no woman in the world could probably resist for very long.

“There’s no comparison,” he says. “I would have studied art history, even if my family didn’t have a cent. And I can recognise a masterpiece when I see one. He can’t. That’s why only raw beginners show their work at his gallery, people who’re still waiting for their big break. Most of them, by the way, will be waiting forever — and rightly so.”

That may all be true. But I still feel the need to defend Lorenzo Santarelli. Or maybe it's some kind of automatic response that I can't do anything about — I just have to contradict Matteo Bertani. It's a kind of pure self-protection, because he has such a powerful physical effect on me. I definitely can't afford to start thinking like him — so I play the devil's advocate.

“What's wrong with giving young artists a chance? Anyway, some people aren't into old masters, they prefer modern art. How can you object to that?”

The expression in Matteo Bertani's eyes changes once more: from angry to amused. Just like that. I despair. The man is a bloody roller coaster.

“Looking at you, I'd never have guessed you'd be so argumentative,” he says. *What is that supposed to mean?* I can't decide whether it's a compliment or a veiled insult.

And incidentally, it's not true, I'm normally peacefulness personified. It takes a lot to coax me out of my shell. The fact that it's only taken this man a few seconds is very confusing.

“I'm not arguing with you,” I say, in as dignified a tone as possible, jutting out my chin. “I just see things a little ... differently.”

My remark has no effect on his smile, and I hate him for having thrown me for a loop again.

“So, why did you want to speak to me?” I insist, in order to cut our *tête-à-tête* short.

He bends forward and leans his forearms on the table so we're at eye level with each other. “Can't you guess?”

No, I think, as I look into his amber eyes. *No idea*. I'm usually pretty good at reading people — but unfortunately, in Matteo Bertani's case, my skills don't seem to be working at all.

“Go on, tell me.”

“Well, I wanted to put our little ‘false start’ right,” he says. “It looks as though we're going to have a lot of dealings with each other in the near future, so I think we ought to get to know each other a little better. Over dinner, for instance?”

His smile is extremely captivating, but I stand firm.

“We're going to have a lot of dealings with each other in the near future?” I reply. “Our auction house hasn't even gotten the commission from Signore di Chessa yet.”

He dismisses this argument. “I think we both know that you're going to get it.”

I furrow my brow, uncertain what to say to that. After everything I've found out about his close ties with Giacomo di Chessa, maybe it would be a good idea to improve my relationship with him a little. On the other hand, I don't know if what he's offering is sufficient as an apology. And I don't know if I can personally afford to get to know the man better. I'm already finding it difficult enough to work amid the storm of feelings he arouses in me.

In a ploy for time, I take a stuffed *involtini* from my plate and shove it into my mouth. It's a big mistake, as I discover right away. The meat may be thin and rolled up, but it's much bulkier than I thought and needs a lot of chewing, which I suspect doesn't exactly look very ladylike. Embarrassed, I hold my hand in front of my mouth and, in complete