

A Girl of White Winter

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Chapter One

While growing up, I never realized how carefully the Lady Giselle hid me from the eyes of men. She did not do this from jealousy or selfishness, but to protect me...as my position in the household was not easy to define.

On an evening in early autumn, as she sat in a chair before me, I piled her dark hair atop her head and fastened it with silver clips. In her late forties, she was still lovely.

Tonight, she wore a green velvet gown with a full skirt and long sleeves.

“Would you like your diamond pendant?” I asked.

Her mind was elsewhere. “Mmmmmm?”

She’d seemed unsettled since mid-afternoon, and I knew she was worried about the outcome of tonight’s dinner gathering.

“Your diamond pendant?” I asked again.

This evening was important, and she would wish to look her best.

Nodding, she said, “Yes, my dear.”

But as I went to fetch it, she reached out and stopped me. “Kara...his lordship has requested that you join us for dinner. The Capellos did not bring their wives or sisters, as this is a business gathering, and his lordship fears the numbers will appear too skewed at the table.” She paused. “Once you finish dressing me, we’ll need to find you a gown. He wants you to be decorative.”

I tensed. “Must I?”

She nodded again, this time more tightly. “Yes. It is his lordship’s wish.”

Though it was common for me to join the family for dinner, over the past summer I had turned eighteen, and I’d not been invited to join a formal dinner with guests in nearly three years. Lady Giselle kept me hidden, even from most of the manor guards.

“Which gown?” I asked, nervous at the thought of dining with strangers. “One of your white silks, I think.”

* * * *

That night, as Giselle and I walked into the dining hall, my stomach tightened when I saw what appeared to be a sea of men milling around before dinner. In truth, only five of the men would be joining us at the table. The rest were merely guards of either our house or the Capellos’.

The group of five had gathered near the hearth.

The lord of our house, Jean de Marco, stood with his and Lady Giselle’s two sons: Geoffrey and Lucas, who were both older than me by a few years. Lord Jean was a large man, and only recently had some of his muscle begun to sag a little. Glancing in our direction, he offered his wife a nod, but did not acknowledge my presence.

He had no love for me.

The other two men were strangers. One appeared to be late middle-aged and the other was in his early thirties.

A table stretched out in the center of the hall, laden with goblets, fine pewter plates, and a centerpiece of the last of our autumn roses.

Beside me, Lady Giselle drew a long breath as her face transformed into a welcoming smile. She took my arm, and we swept into the vast room.

“Gentlemen,” she said, approaching the group of five. “Forgive our tardy arrival.”

This was a polite but expected comment. Women of her station never arrived at a formal dinner before her guests. It was the lord’s duty to meet them.

Both strangers turned to offer a greeting, but at the sight of me, the words froze on their lips.

I was not taken aback, as this was a normal response from anyone seeing me for the first time. My lady assured me that it was due to my unusual coloring. I was small, slender, and pale-skinned, but my hair was so blond that she called it “silver” and my eyes so crystalline blue that they seemed to glow against the pale background. Once, Lord Jean had shivered as he studied me and said, “She looks like a winter morning.”

I had long wished for dark hair and brown eyes.

Lady Giselle was accustomed to men going speechless at the sight of me, and she pretended not to notice their half-opened mouths. “May I present our ward, Kara.”

Lord Jean flinched slightly at the term “ward,” but I was the only one who noticed.

Turning to me, Giselle motioned to the men with a graceful hand. “Kara, this is Lord Trey Capello and his son, Lord Royce.”

Lord Trey must have been past fifty, but he was slender and striking, with light brown hair and a close-trimmed beard. He recovered himself quickly, kissing first her hand and then mine.

“My ladies,” he said. “We’ll be blessed with your company at dinner.”

Somehow, he sounded sincere, and I began to relax a little. Perhaps I would be required to only nod and smile and not answer any difficult questions about my identity.

But Royce did not recover so quickly and continued to stare, running his eyes over my face and silver-blond hair. He bore little resemblance to his father, taller and more muscular with sandy blond hair and a clean-shaven face.

I hoped he would not try to engage me in conversation, as I was not nearly so skilled as my lady and had little experience in talking to men.

“Shall I ring for dinner so that we might sit?” Giselle asked.

Lord Jean nodded to her, and we gathered at the table. To my relief, I was seated between Geoffrey and Lucas. I didn’t know them well, but they had long grown accustomed to my appearance, and neither would expect me to talk.

Unfortunately, Royce was seated directly across the table and although he’d stopped staring, he continued glancing in my direction.

A number of servants entered the hall carrying trays of food and decanters of wine.

Wine was poured, and the fish course was served. I was not fond of wine but tried to sip politely.

“You understand I wish to buy the entire two hundred acres?” Lord Jean asked after swallowing a bite of trout.

This was the reason for the Capellos’ visit. For nearly three centuries, the noble de Marco family had boasted one of the most renowned vineyards in the nation of Samourè. They grew mainly white grapes, but of late, demand for white wine had been waning, and Lord Jean had long coveted a large piece of undeveloped land just off our southern border—and on the Capellos’ northern border. Both its soil and its positioning were perfect for growing the purple grapes of dark red wine.

I’d learned all this information from my lady. To date, the Capellos had never responded to any of Lord Jean’s offers, but...it appeared the land somehow belonged to Royce and not to his father, and now, Royce might

be willing to sell. They'd been traveling, visiting other nobles, and we were their last stop on the way home.

Lady Giselle had impressed upon me the importance of this meeting.

Lord Jean could not accept failure in these negotiations.

His question about the two hundred acres hung in the air. Royce didn't answer, but he was again staring at me.

"My son?" Lord Trey asked.

Royce turned his head to look down the table at Lord Jean. "Let us talk of business over breakfast. The ride was long today, and for tonight, I'd rather dine and speak of less weighty matters."

His voice was deep and possessed a serious quality that suggested he rarely made jokes. I knew that he and his father would be spending at least one night with us, as their own manor was a full day's ride south.

Lord Jean's jaw twitched, but he nodded. "As you wish." Then he looked to Lady Giselle. "Time for the next course, I think."

* * * *

Somehow, I made it through dinner and dessert without being required to enter the conversation. I made certain to pay polite attention to all that was said in regards to crops and taxes and other matters men tended to discuss over dinner, and I smiled whenever Lucas or Lord Trey said something amusing—for they were the only men in the group disposed toward humor.

Finally, at the end, I breathed in quiet relief that the women would be excused so the men might switch to a stronger port wine and play cards.

Lady Giselle was a woman of flawless timing, and at the precise moment, she rose. I stood quickly.

"Gentlemen," she said, "it has been a pleasure. Kara and I will leave you to your amusements, and I shall see you at breakfast."

All the men stood in respect, and the two of us turned to leave, heading for the archway. I looked forward to a quiet night of either reading to her aloud or perhaps telling her a story from memory (which she loved) or playing at chess or working on our embroidery or hearing her thoughts on how Lord Jean might approach Royce in this land deal.

"My lady?" Mistress Duval, our housekeeper, came to the archway just as we reached it. "Forgive me, but the cook fears we don't have enough eggs for the breakfast that was planned. Could you come and approve a new menu?"

"Of course."

Lady Giselle was a woman who oversaw every detail of the running of her household. Normally, breakfast menus did not require approval, but we all knew the importance of this meeting. Everything from the guest rooms to the food had to be perfect.

Turning to me, Giselle said, “My dear. You go up, and I’ll come soon.”
“Yes, my lady.”

She turned and swept down the east corridor for the kitchens. I headed for the west stairwell, so that I might ascend to her private apartments where she would meet me.

I’d walked only about six steps when a voice sounded from behind.
“Wait.”

The voice was deep and possessed of a serious quality.

As I turned, my stomach again tightened at the sight of Royce walking toward me. Desperately, I looked down the east corridor, but my lady was gone, and I was alone with Royce. He strode to me with purpose. Facing him, my eyes were level with his collarbones, which were visible through the V-neck of his tunic. I did not look up at his face.

“Who are you?” he asked bluntly.

Despair washed through me. I would not escape the evening without answering questions.

“Lady Giselle’s ward,” I whispered.

“That’s not an answer. If she had a ward from one of the noble families, it would be common knowledge. You’d have been seen at court.” He paused and, if possible, his tone hardened. “Who was your father?”

I could not raise my eyes from his collarbones any more than I could answer his question, because the truth was a family secret.

I knew the story well.

Nineteen years ago, Lady Giselle’s brother, Jacques, had visited these vineyards. Giselle adored her handsome brother, who was charming and reckless—or so she described him to me. At the same time, she had a beautiful lady’s maid named Coraline, of whom she had grown fond.

Upon his visit, Jacques seduced Coraline, and as soon as he learned she was with child, he fled. For a marriage to a wealthy wool merchant’s daughter had already been arranged for him.

When Lord Jean learned of Coraline’s condition, he ordered that she be dismissed, but for the first time, Giselle went against him, begging that Coraline be allowed to remain. Such a state of affairs was unheard of... to keep a pregnant woman as a lady’s maid.

In the end, Giselle won, for she seldom asked him for anything, and though Lord Jean did not spend much time with her, in his heart, he liked to please her.

I was born.

At first, out of guilt, my father sent Coraline some money, but he never visited or took any action to see me and remained at his home with his new wife. When I was two years old, he drank too much wine and took up a challenge to ride one of his horses in a race.

In his drunken state, he fell off over a jump and was killed.

When I was five, a fever passed through our lands, and some of our household, including my mother, died.

I had no parents, and I was alone.

Lord Jean might not have noticed my existence had I been given to the kitchen women and raised as a servant. But Lady Giselle had only given birth to sons, and she had come to love me. She insisted I be raised as her ward, calling me her niece in private.

Again, Lord Jean protested, seeing me as the bastard child of a lady's maid, certainly not worthy of the title of ward in the house of de Marco. But again, Giselle prevailed. I grew up as her companion; not exactly a niece, but neither was I a servant. I had duties for her, but I ate with the family and wore the fine clothing of a noble.

All was well until I turned fifteen and the house guards began watching me enter a room. Of course they did not dare speak to me, but this was a forerunning of things to come. At that time, I was allowed to join dinners when we had guests, but then, during a visit from the Larues, the second son of Lord Alan Larue stared at me over the table. A week later, he asked Lord Jean for my hand in marriage—with no questions regarding my birth. Lord Jean thought it an astonishing offer and wanted to accept, but Lady Giselle pleaded that at fifteen, I was too young.

After that, she stopped including me at dinner when we had guests. She kept me to herself, and I loved our quiet time together. For she often fell into sadness, and I knew how to distract her, how to make her smile. She promised she would keep me safe.

And now...three years later, I was in a corridor, alone with a strange nobleman who continued demanding answers.

“Who was your father?” Royce repeated.

No matter that Giselle called me her niece in private, I would never expose her beloved brother as a seducer of women or a man who abandoned unwanted children.

So I whispered, “I do not know.”

Before I knew what was happening, he grasped my chin and forced me to look up at him. Though his grip did not hurt, he allowed me to feel some of the strength in his hand. His eyes were a shade of light brown.

“What do you mean you don’t know? If you’re the de Marcos’ ward, how is that possible?” He didn’t sound angry, only confused. “Who was your mother?”

Wanting him to let me go, I tried to meet his gaze and answered, “Lady Giselle’s maid.”

He let go and stepped back.

I hadn’t told him the whole truth, but enough to give him an understanding. No matter what Giselle called me, I was the illegitimate child of a servant.

I was no one, not worth his attention.

Whirling, I hurried for the west stairwell.

* * * *

The next morning, Lady Giselle sent word to my room, informing me I would be expected at breakfast, but I was not concerned. By now, Royce would have told his father of my low status, and they would not notice me. Besides, the men would be focused on the land deal, not upon any women at the table.

I wore my hair down and donned a muslin dress of a shade my lady called ice blue, the same color as my eyes. All of the day dresses or evening gowns she had made for me were either white or this same shade of light blue. She said the colors suited me, and she sometimes enjoyed dressing me and trying different styles with my hair.

My own private room was near to Lady Giselle’s apartments, and as I reached her door, I found it open, suggesting she had already gone down.

“My lady?” I asked from the doorway.

Silence told me she was not there.

Quickly, I made my way to the stairwell and descended to the main floor. Upon arriving at the dining hall, I found everyone from last night had already gathered—with the exception of Lucas and Geoffrey. Would they not be attending? Perhaps they were not necessary for the business dealings this morning.

Then why had I been asked?

Royce stood apart with his arms crossed, and he appeared to be watching the archway as I entered. At the sight of me, he went still and gave me the same fixed attention from last night, taking in my long silver-blond hair

and light blue gown. But this morning, I was beginning to recognize the expression on his face; it looked like hunger.

“She’s here,” he said. “We can begin.”

Two things about these statements puzzled me. First, was he the one who’d requested my presence this morning? Why? And second...breakfast had not even been served yet. Did he wish to conduct the business dealing before eating?

Lord Jean seemed equally nonplussed, but he gestured to the table. “By all means.”

I could see that he didn’t care when or how these dealings took place, so long as he acquired the land.

Walking over, I greeted my lady and sat beside her. Lord Trey and Royce sat across from us, and Lord Jean took his place at the head.

As of yet, we’d not even been served tea.

Lord Jean began immediately. “I’ll pay two thousand in silver for the land. That’s more than what it’s worth and a fair offer.”

Royce studied him. “I’m willing to take fifteen hundred.” Then he motioned to me with his head. “But I want the girl.”

I went cold.

Lord Trey turned to his son in open surprise.

Lord Jean frowned.

Lady Giselle stiffened, and she spoke first. “My lord,” she said to Royce. “I don’t understand. You cannot be asking for Kara’s hand as you already have a wife. You were married eight years ago, and to the best of my knowledge, the lady Loraine still lives.”

Royce turned his cold gaze upon her. “You need not remind me of my marital status.”

Lord Jean’s frown deepened. “Then what are you asking?”

Royce leaned back in his chair. “I want the girl.”

At this, all polite pretense vanished from my lady’s voice. “As what? Your mistress? You’ll set her up in some cottage near your manor until you grow tired of her? I think not!”

They spoke as if I weren’t there.

Lord Trey raised one hand to her and addressed his son. “This girl? You’re certain?”

Royce nodded, but the brief exchange only increased the confusion in Lord Jean’s expression.

Lord Trey sighed. “What my son suggests is not so shocking as it first sounds. We are more...modern at the Capello estate. Your ward would

hold a position of honor, and she would reside with us, in her own rooms, at the manor. She would have a place in the family.”

“As his mistress?” my lady demanded. “No.”

“Giselle!” Lord Jean barked, perhaps trying to take control of the conversation.

Royce shrugged. “The girl is of no birth. She cannot remain your ward forever, and this is a good offer.”

I remained frozen, but beside me, I could hear my lady’s quick breaths.

“Kara is the daughter of my brother,” she said. “She is my blood.”

All three men were taken aback, but I knew Lord Jean’s response was one of embarrassment. This truth had never been spoken outside her rooms.

For just an instant, Royce’s face flickered, and then he shook his head. “It is of no matter. She’s of no name and no house.”

My lady’s hand clenched into a fist, but Lord Jean broke in, this time speaking directly to Lord Trey. “My lord, you can see the attachment my wife has for the girl. Surely, some other arrangement can be made in exchange for the land. I would offer twenty-five hundred pieces of silver.”

Royce leaned forward in his chair, addressing Lord Jean. “There will be no further bargaining here. I’ll take fifteen hundred in silver for the land. But if you don’t agree to my terms, I won’t sell to you. And since I find myself in need of funds, I’ll sell the land to someone else.” He paused to let the effect of his threat sink in. Then he repeated slowly, “I want the girl.”

A long moment of silence followed, and then Lord Jean looked to Lady Giselle. “Get her packed.”

My lady shot to her feet. “No!” Reaching out, she took my hand and pulled me up. “We will be in my apartments until these gentlemen leave.”

Needing no urging from her, I gripped her hand and we fled from the hall.

* * * *

Once she and I were alone in her apartments, her anger began to fade and I could see fear in her eyes. The sight of this was more terrifying than anything that had transpired downstairs.

“Don’t let them take me,” I said.

But before she could answer, the door to her apartments opened, and Lord Jean stood on the other side with two of our house guards behind him. Upon seeing the guards, Giselle went pale.

As Lord Jean stepped inside the room, she shouted at him. “This is your fault! You were the one who insisted she be at the table last night to create a distraction and put them off their game.”

His expression was difficult to read. I'd never once heard her speak to him in any other tone than polite deference. He appeared both angry and uncomfortable.

"They've promised me she'll be treated well," he said.

"Promised?" she cried. "And what good is that? You know nothing of Royce Capello. For all you know, he keeps a riding crop under his bed."

Lord Jean took a step back. "Don't be vulgar."

"Vulgar? Me? You stand there and say that when you are giving our girl away to be some nobleman's whore!"

His discomfort increased, but so did his anger. "She is not our girl."

I stood pressed against a wall, and she suddenly went slack in despair. "Please, my lord. Don't do this. Don't take her from me. I could not bear it."

He appeared to waver, and hope rose inside me. In his own way, he loved her. He cared for her feelings.

But then, his expression hardened again. "I have no choice. I've paid the fifteen hundred, and the deed will be sent. A maid is packing Kara's things now, and the Capellos are making ready to leave." Striding over, he gripped my upper arm but spoke only to her. "You will remain here until they are gone. I'll leave men to watch over you."

With that, he dragged me forward. I struggled to pull away, but I don't think he noticed.

When we reached the door, my lady spoke from behind us.

"I'll never forgive you for this, Jean. Do you understand what that means? I won't forgive you."

Again, he wavered.

Then he dragged me out the door.

* * * *

Down in the courtyard, I saw my trunk being lifted into the back of a wagon, which was already half-filled with the Capellos' trunks and supplies. A maid from the house came to me and wrapped a cloak around my shoulders, but I was too numb to respond or thank her.

I could not believe what was happening.

Lord Trey and Royce's horses were saddled, and their six guards were making ready to leave. One of our own guards led a white mare from the stables...with a sidesaddle.

The sight of this made me fear I would faint.

At the look on my face, Royce frowned. "What's wrong?"

Lord Jean's brows knitted and then smoothed. "Oh, Kara has never been on...She's never ridden a horse."

"How is that possible?"

Shifting his weight between his feet, Lord Jean answered. "Because she's never been off the manor grounds. She's rarely been outside the house. You must understand that my lady has kept her...sheltered."

Silence followed, and even in my frightened state, I sensed there was a good deal taking place beneath this conversation. I simply did not know what.

"You could have her ride in the wagon beside your driver?" Lord Jean suggested.

"No," Royce answered. "I'll lead her horse."

Turning, he gripped my waist and lifted me as if I weighed nothing, setting me into the saddle. Then he mounted his own horse and drew up beside me, lifting the reins over my mount's head and gripping them in his left hand.

As opposed to reassuring me, this act only made me feel more trapped.

Five of their guards sat on horses. The sixth drove the wagon. The guards wore sheathed swords, but Trey and Royce did not.

I cast a pleading look at Lord Jean, but he turned away. My horse lurched forward, and I gripped her mane. Within moments, I found myself outside the gates of our manor for the first time in my life, in the company of strangers.

I was not even allowed to tell Lady Giselle good-bye.