



Forbidden Publications



The Virgin Courtesan

THE VIRGIN COURTESAN

A Forbidden Publications production, JANUARY 2007

Forbidden Publications

PO Box 153

East Prairie, MO 63845

www.forbiddenpublications.com

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ISBN: Not Assigned.

Sela Carsen

The Virgin Courtesan

By

Sela Carsen

Chapter One

Venice 1528

Domenico Venieri surveyed the woman skirting the edges of the room. She was new enough to the salon that she attracted attention from many men, but they soon excused themselves, leaving her with a puzzled frown. He took another sip of the rich red wine as Sessina di Campanella approached her. Whatever they discussed made the younger woman pale, but then she nodded and made her way to the harp set up in the corner of the bright room.

The first uncertain notes made no impression on the noisy crowd. She drew her trembling hands back and placed them on her lap. Head bowed, eyes closed, she took a deep breath that drew his eyes like a lodestone to the frankly magnificent expanse of flesh displayed by the low bodice of her gown. A single ruby, the deep color of the wine he drank, glittered between her breasts.

Whatever her thoughts, they seemed to calm her as she raised her fingers again to the strings. This time, she struck the notes confidently. A sweet, simple melody flowed out. A smile touched her crimson lips, and she sang an accompaniment.

Attar of roses, the scent cloying and heavy, wafted up from behind him. He glanced up as Sessina draped herself over his shoulder.

"Interested?" She watched the girl.

"Should I be?" he drawled.

"She's new." The madam trailed her fingers around the small ruff of his collar. It itched more than enticed.

"I can tell. She seems a little older than most beginners."

"Her father recently died and she has no other family."

"And this is the life she chooses? Why does she not marry?"

Sessina laughed low. "Does she not look familiar to you? Do you not remember her face from your childhood?"

Domenico frowned and studied the girl again, casting in his memory for her features. Ah. He had it.

"La Calandrina?"

"Precisely, signore. That is the daughter of La Calandrina, one of the most famous *cortigiana onesta* ever to grace Venice." A slight edge of irritation tainted the older woman's voice. He smirked.

"Jealous, Sessina? Afraid that she will outshine you as the years pass?"

"Not as jealous as I might be. The daughter is different. Less suited to this life. You'll see," she said, then bent down to press her lips to his cheek before she left.

It did not take much observation to realize Sessina was right. The other courtesans had been in the profession since their youth, and it showed in their eyes and their laughter. This girl had less polish, less artifice, and though her features were similar to her mother's, she did not possess La Calandrina's almost blinding beauty. Her loveliness was subtle, more in the openness of her expression than from cosmetics.

The half-up, half-down style of her dark hair complemented the delicately angular shape of her face. Sable locks curled over her shoulders, drawing attention to the pale, silken skin there. Her gown was of a style fifteen years old, but it suited her. Gave her a gravity and simplicity that the ornately gilded suite lacked.

She finished singing, then began another, more complex piece of music. Her artistry was undeniable and natural. Her mother, a gifted musician whose name meant the Lark, had undoubtedly passed her gift on to her child.

Domenico's interest was piqued, and he recognized the impulse that served him well as a trader. The urge to possess something unique. For the last few years, that desire had been restricted to exotic goods such as ivory and spices, but women—never. They were a more common type of merchandise. One was as good as another, in his

experience.

But this woman intrigued him for some reason. It wasn't her beauty, strictly speaking, just some vague notion that she might...match him. Perhaps it was the song she played, perhaps it was the wry quirk of her lips as she watched fat old men make fools of themselves over the other courtesans in the room. The whim, foolish as it might be, stayed with him. In fact, the novel sensation drove him to toss down the last of his wine and rise to his feet.

A hand landed heavily on his shoulder. He resisted the temptation to knock it off. Camaro Terullio, a Roman merchant who also happened to be the Pope's bastard brother, gestured sloppily with his glass.

"Has the little lark enchanted you with her music? But she is not so beautiful as the lark. More of a plain sparrow, though she has a lovely song."

"What do you know of music, Terullio? You do not appreciate the *cortigiana* for their parlor talents." The man reeked—and in a city where the canals often doubled as sewers, that was saying something. Up close, the man's complexion was oily and dirty. Black lines of filth stained his nails. What was Sessina thinking to let him into her circle? Probably that the wool merchant rolled in money and influence, though he smelled as if he rolled in sheep dung. But his stench was more than a fetid smell. Domenico knew the foulness went down to the bone. Unfortunately, he could do nothing about it. Yet.

"We'll see if she sings as prettily in the bedroom," he said, and smirked as he slapped Domenico on the shoulder.

He swaggered up to the little singer and swept a lock of hair off her nape. Her fingers fumbled, and the harp made a discordant twang as she glanced up at the looming man. He whispered something to her, then swooped in and planted a sloppy kiss on her mouth.

Domenico looked away. He'd been wrong. She was only a prostitute, after all.

The sound of a slap and a curse turned him back.

* * * *

"Tu sei un porco!" Nerina Morinelo had had enough. Sessina had spoken sharply to her earlier, insisting that she make a stronger effort to be accommodating to the gentlemen, or she would cease to sponsor her. But this was more than she could take.

"You are a pig," she spat at the Roman. "How cheaply do you think I hold myself? Not for all the money in the world would I take you into my bed. You're disgusting." A cup of wine stood at her elbow and she threw it into the dirty little man's face as he held his cheek, the skin red with her handprint.

"Whore! Bitch!" he shrieked, spittle flying. "Don't you know who I am?"

"I don't care." She swept up her skirts so they wouldn't be fouled by the swine's touch. "Sessina, I'm leaving."

"Oh, I know," said the older woman with a furious glare. "Don't let anyone here stop you." She hurried over to the seething merchant, rubbing against him shamelessly in a bid to keep his favor. Nerina shook her head and pushed on toward the door.

It would have been a dramatic exit had she not forgotten she stood in a pair of velvet *chopines* – platform shoes that slid on over her slippers, adding almost five inches to her height. She had spent weeks learning to walk in them, but in her rush to leave, she failed to balance herself and wobbled, windmilling her arms frantically.

A hand appeared from behind her and grabbed her elbow, steadying her. Laughter and cruel jokes followed her out the door, and as soon as she was in the street, she kicked off the ridiculous shoes, not caring anymore when the hem of her dress puddled on the dirty cobblestones. Nerina couldn't even bring herself to face her rescuer until she was sure she wouldn't disgrace herself by sobbing.

"Dio mio," she said when she finally looked at him. "Not you."

Chapter Two

She'd seen him upstairs, watching her from under hooded eyes. If the other men in the salon had looked like him, perhaps her new profession would have been no hardship. Dressed in a doublet of midnight blue velvet trimmed in gold, he held himself with military bearing. He was large and muscular, his face tanned from the sun with slight crow's feet at the corners of his eyes as if he spent his days looking into the distance. Streaks of blond and red ran through his dark hair and neatly trimmed beard.

But now she was exhausted. All the fire, all the pious righteousness flooded out of her and left her drained. He could have looked like Apollo himself for all the interest she could muster. The cold street was empty but for them, and her fingers lifted to the jeweled ornament at her bosom.

"Thank you for helping me, signore, but I really must get home now."

"I don't think you should go home alone," he said.

"I was born and raised in Venice, good sir. I can take care of myself." Nerina straightened and decided to head for the Grand Canal, praying she'd be able to find a gondola at this hour. Praying she had the fare for passage. Despite her brave words, she had no desire to walk all the way from the Piazza San Marco to her humble neighborhood in the Cannaregio district in the dark. The man reached out and grasped her sleeve, forcing her attention back to him. She propped her hand on her hip, exasperated.

"What is wrong now?"

"I'm not worried about ordinary Venetian crime, signorina. I don't think you know who you insulted in there."

"Some Roman pig. Does it matter?"

"That was Camaro Terullio."

She shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"Perhaps you've heard of his brother, then. Pope Clemens Septimus." The man crossed his arms and waited for her reaction.

"*Dio mio*," she said again, smacking her forehead with her palm and slumping back against the wall. "Just my luck. My first night as a courtesan and I slapped the pope's brother. I slapped a de' Medici!" Everyone knew of the infamous family and their influence. They had managed again to put one of their own into the papacy – Clement the Seventh, born Giulio di Giuliano de' Medici – and the world trembled in fear. She pursed her lips. Something was wrong. "Wait. I thought you said his name was Terullio, not de' Medici."

"Wrong side of the blanket, but he doesn't let that stop him from throwing his weight around." He stepped closer and tucked his finger under her chin, bringing her eyes to his.

"Such spirit," he murmured. "You might do nicely."

"Would you like to check my teeth, signore? Or shall I neigh and prance?" It grated on Nerina's nerves to be treated like an object, and she didn't bother to hide her annoyance. He smiled, a quirk of his sensual mouth, and she fought to hold onto her anger. She twisted away.

"Tonight was your first night as a courtesan?"

Frustration turned to hot humiliation and she cringed.

"I'd rather not talk about my spectacular failure in there – and I really must get home." She picked up her chopines and grabbed a handful of her over-long skirt. "Thank you for your help. I bid you a pleasant evening." She nodded as regally as she could and made for the canal.

"He'll come after you," he called.

The conviction in his voice stopped her. "Why would he bother? To him, I'm just another prostitute. I'm of no importance."

"You humiliated him in front of a crowd, before other men of stature. He won't let that go unpunished." He caught up with her. "Signorina, I've seen what he can do when he's crossed." An expression of revulsion twisted his face, strong enough to widen her eyes. She didn't know this Camaro Terullio, but fear began to creep in.

"What can I do, signore? How can I escape him?"

"Let me help you," he said.

"What?" Her eyebrows reached for her hairline.

"I want to help you."

Suspicion crowded out the fear, and her eyes narrowed. "Why? Why would you help a stranger?"

"Not only spirited, but smart." The man avoided her question and tipped his cap at her. Most women would find that charming. "Of course, I realized that when you slapped Terullio." He smiled at her. Fine. *She* found him charming, but she hardened herself against the thrill.

"Your point, signore?"

The man swept her an elegant bow. "Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Domenico Venieri, ship's captain." Nerina sucked in a tiny breath. The Venieri family was famous throughout the Veneto for the far flung reaches of their merchant ships. They brought spices, fabrics, books and experiences from across the known world – and they brought them all to Venice before sending them along the northern trade routes through Dalmatia and into Europe.

What a night. First, she insulted the brother of one of the most powerful men in the world, and now one of the wealthiest men in the world bowed to her. Life, as her mother had often warned her, was strange.

"Nerina Morinelo, failed courtesan." She curtsied, and he grinned. Nerina smiled back. What else could she do?

"This has been the most interesting evening I've passed in a very long time," he said.

"The night is young. Wait until a slobbering Roman madman comes bursting out

of the building, brandishing his rapier. I shall have to fight him off with my chopines.”

“Or you could come with me.”

Nerina didn’t grow up Venetian for nothing. Suspicion lurked uppermost in her mind. “You still haven’t told me why you want to help me.”

“Because, Signorina Morinelo, I need you to help me. Terullio has been sabotaging my trade routes somehow. I can’t prove it yet, so I can’t take it to the courts. I need leverage, and I think I may be able to use you to get it.”

A long silence hovered.

“That’s the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me, Signore Venieri.” And it certainly put her in her place. Still, how many options did she have left? She was a woman alone in a big city. She had no money, no family, and whatever friends she might have made were upstairs laughing at her. All she had now was a powerful enemy. And this man.

“At least come with me tonight, and we’ll talk about it. I’ll pay you for your time.” He held out his hand. His voice was deep and dark and perfectly calculated to make her shiver with want. And there lay the problem. Being a courtesan was a bad enough way to live. The only thing worse would be actually enjoying it – and she had a terrible feeling this man would make her enjoy it.

But she was nearly penniless and he was offering to pay her for only a few hours of talking. And if he did decide he wanted something more, it would be no worse than how she had planned to end her night. Hesitantly, she reached out until her fingers touched his.

“Yes, let’s talk.”

* * * *

Nerina had left the salon without her cape and she shivered in the early autumn night. An especially sharp chill shook her, and he swept off his short cape and settled it around her shoulders. The scent of a wax pomander – rich cloves and vanilla –

enveloped her.

"*Grazie, signore,*" she said and he nodded his acknowledgement. With his hand under hers, they walked the streets of the *sestieri* San Marco, listening to the slap of water against gondolas tied off for the night. The moon, huge and bright, hung low in the sky, only glimpsed as they passed between dark, still houses. And yet, though the city slept, an air of life, of expectation, of exploration lightened the air around them.

When they reached his private apartments, warmth greeted her. Not only the heat of the fire, carefully laid for the master's return, but the warmth of a household, busy and happy. He offered wine and she took it gratefully, holding the cup in both hands as she perched on the edge of a settee covered in bright needlework.

"So, what were you doing at Sessina's tonight?" he asked as he settled into the deep cushions next to her.

She sighed and sipped at the heavy wine, letting the fragrance seep into her head. "Trying to earn my keep. But I think I may need to find new employment."

He chuckled, and the sound vibrated in the air around her.

"Probably. It wouldn't have lasted long anyway, I think."

Nerina turned to him, annoyed. "Why not? Don't you think I would have made a good *cortigiana*?"

"*Calmati, signorina.* I mean only that Sessina's jealousy would eventually have gotten the better of her."

"Trust me; there is no reason for Sessina to be jealous of me. She's so beautiful and worldly." Sessina had been her mother's ... perhaps friend was too familiar a word. Of unsanctified parentage, but blessed with abundant wit and beauty, Sessina had made a place for herself in a city that could pick and choose its stars. Once Nerina decided to become a courtesan, she knew Sessina could open doors for her. No standing on street corners, no groping against the wall. It had all seemed so sensible at the time.

"She's aging more rapidly than she cares to admit, and it has caused her to become desperate. She has to be desperate to accept Terullio as a client."

And here they came to the matter at hand. Nerina took another long drink.

"So, signore--"

"Domenico."

"Domenico." She nodded and her head felt light. Oops. Too much to drink too quickly. She suppressed a giggle. "You said you needed leverage. How can I help with that?"

"I need you to pose as my mistress."

He waited while she choked on her mouthful of wine, then handed her a linen handkerchief.

"Pose as your mistress? I don't understand."

"I need bait, Nerina. And I need him so bent on stealing you from me that he becomes careless." He leaned forward, his doublet straining at the shoulders. "It won't be dangerous, I promise. I'll protect you. He's hated my family for years, and the mere fact that you're mine will eat at him. But if you dangle yourself in front of him a bit, toss him a hint that if he had the Venieri money, he might have more of a chance with you, he'll drop everything to pursue you."

The wine began to sour in her stomach. "What makes you think this will work?"

"Because I know Terullio. He likes to brag, especially if he thinks it will get him bedded. But he doesn't boast to other men of stature, only to women. That way, no matter what they say, he can always claim they're lying."

"Because women always lie, is that it?" She leaned back and rolled the cool cup against her forehead. "I don't know. There are too many holes in this plan. How do you know he'll come after me to begin with? What if he doesn't care?"

"He cares. Trust me. I remember the first time he went after a woman who scorned him." His face settled into lines that frightened her.

Nerina put her hand on his. "Domenico?"

"She was my sister." The black silence that followed told her a great deal of what Terullio had done—none of it was good. She made up her mind. She hadn't accomplished much in her life, just keeping her head above water, trying to survive as she was tossed from one home to the next. But this was something she could do. She

could help right a wrong. Protect others from becoming victims.

"If I help you and we get the answers you want, will it ruin him?"

"Completely. Not even his brother will be able to help him."

"Then let's do it. When do we start?"

"Tonight." He turned over his hand so that her fingers were captured in his, carrying them to his lips.

Chapter Three

The room was hot. Very, very hot. The shivers that flew over her spine had to be the result of too much wine. His lips on her hand shouldn't raise such heat in her body. But doubt crowded out lust again.

"I don't think this will work," she said, pulling her hand from his and standing to pace the floor. "I mean, I want it to work, but I don't think I'm the right woman for the job."

He settled back into the settee and watched her as he had in the salon, his eyes heavy lidded, but intent. Her skin rippled. She felt as though she was being watched by the tiger she had once seen in a cage at a festival. It wasn't a comfortable feeling. She babbled on.

"You saw what happened tonight. I'm not even good at being a courtesan, what makes you think I can pretend to be a mistress?"

He put down his wine and stood, catching her around the waist and pulling her close.

"What makes you think this is pretend, Nerina? Even without Terullio around, I would want you. You're lovely, talented, intelligent, and you have a good heart."

"Oh." Now that her hands were flattened against his chest, she didn't know what to do with them. She played with the chain at the front of his doublet. The velvet felt soft and warm against her fingers. The chain was warm, too, from the heat of his body. "You think I'm lovely?"

"Of all the things I mentioned, that's the one you're least sure of?" He laughed, and she ducked her head.

"You didn't grow up as the daughter of La Calandrina."

"Be that as it may, you intrigue me. And that's worth far more than mere beauty." He bent his head and she let instinct take over, raising her face to his.

It was like brushing sweet rose petals over her lips. The kisses, at first soft and gentle, grew firmer and at the same time, more lush. She moaned and the sound seemed to spur him on, for he drew her even closer. Her hands reached to tangle in his hair.

He swept her hair back and his fingers burned her skin like tiny licks of flame. His tongue traced the bow of her upper lip. She opened her mouth to taste more, and he took what she offered. Fighting for breath, drowning in sensation, Nerina gasped.

"Stay with me tonight, *cara mia*," he whispered onto her lips.

"I..."

"Stay. You'll want for nothing, you'll see. I'll buy you dresses; furnish a suite for you, only stay."

His words trickled in like a cold stream, dampening the dizzying heat of her body. Payment. He spoke of paying her.

Nerina pushed away from him, holding out a shaking hand to keep him at bay. Was this the life she had chosen? Was this the only path for her now?

"No. This isn't right." The wine made her clumsy, and she stumbled on her over-long skirt.

"Nerina?"

"Why can't I stay at my home?" Home. She wanted to go home. Where she could be herself, where no one expected kisses in exchange for coins.

"If you are to be my mistress, I want you close by. Who knows when desire will overcome us," he said with a charming leer. But this time it wasn't charming. He reached for her again, ignoring the hand she placed firmly against his chest.

"Stop, signore. I can't be your mistress in truth. This is all a pose for Terullio, isn't it?" Confused and slightly nauseated from the wine, Nerina tried to remember.

"We agreed that you would be my mistress." His grip loosened and she stepped

away.

"No, we agreed I would *pose* as your mistress. I can't...be with you like that, Domenico."

"I don't understand."

He looked so masculine and yet so precious. Thwarted desire held his body rigid, but when he rubbed his hands over his hair, it stuck out in funny little clumps. That touch of vulnerability, more than anything else, tempted her to go to him, smooth away his frustration and straighten his curls. But she couldn't.

"Explain it to me then, Nerina. You would have sold yourself to any man with the price earlier, but now you won't have me even though I know you want me? Or was that just an act? Is that how you kiss all your clients?"

She blushed with shame and fury. "I shouldn't have to explain myself to you, signore. And I wouldn't bother, except that if we're going to get rid of that man, I think you deserve the truth." Nerina pushed at her hair, trying to force herself into order. She held up fistfuls of her dress to pace without tripping over the excess length.

"You know my mother was La Calandrina, *si*? Perhaps you do not know my father—Tommaso Morinelo."

"Morinelo the alchemist? He was a fine man—I did not know he had a daughter."

"He had other children, but I am the youngest. Mama raised me and taught me music, art and philosophy. When I was fifteen, Mama died and I went to live with Papa, who taught me science and alchemy. I was more protected there. They wanted me to marry well and live a normal life. I wanted it, too." She stopped and stared out of a lead glass window. The moon looked rippled, like the waters of the Grand Canal. "We should have known better. No man of honor would marry the illegitimate daughter of a whore."

"With such illustrious parents, it's no wonder you have so many talents." His answer was phrased carefully. Diplomatically. Her lips quirked in wry acknowledgement.

"Domenico, listen to me. I may have many talents, but as my parent's daughter, I have very few options in life. My family is scattered. None remain in Venice. I have no real friends and no more money—nor any honorable way to earn it. Tonight was the first time I ever went out like this." Nerina gestured to her beautiful, low-cut gown. It had been her mother's favorite, not least because of the clever sheath sewn into the bodice to hold a jeweled weapon. "Tonight, I was to become a prostitute in truth, because you can't be a courtesan if you're still a virgin."

Silence pervaded the room and she watched him, waiting for his reaction.

"A few hours ago, you would have sold such a precious commodity to any man with the right coin." All diplomacy was gone, and his voice was cold. So cold now. Nerina hugged herself against the chill.

"It's true," she agreed. "But I found I could not. I know now it was the wrong decision." She could barely bring herself to look at him. Water from the small passage below lapped against the stone of the building.

"I still need you, Nerina."

"I still want to help you. I'm only sorry I can't be everything you ask."

Domenico walked to the window. His plan was in serious jeopardy. A virgin. That took the wind out of his sails. He shouldn't even be asking this of her.

"Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it won't work at all. I need a professional. Someone who can look and act the part of a mistress without faltering."

"I can do that," she said, looking at him with hope in her eyes.

He shook his head. "You couldn't do it earlier tonight."

"That was...personal. Things were out of my control and I was afraid. But I can do this now. I know I can."

"Oh really?" He raised a brow in challenge. If she could prove it to him, there was still a chance for vengeance against Terullio. If...

She bowed her head and closed her eyes, just as she had before playing the harp earlier. When she opened them, a different woman stood before him.

Her dark eyes glittered in the candlelight as she shook back her hair. The

movement thrust her breasts into prominence. They were magnificent, and his fingers twitched by his side, eager to hold them. A smile touched her lips, not the musician's confidence of earlier, but a woman's surety of self. She sauntered forward, her hips swaying to a tune only she could hear—a song of wanton lust, the same song that beat in his veins now.

“Signore Terullio,” she said, distracting him from his carnal thoughts. “You didn’t come after me tonight.”

“What?” He told himself she was playing a part, but it was just a whisper against the rush of blood in his ears.

Her lips, red with wine, rounded. “Tut tut. That little pat I gave you in the salon meant nothing, signore. It was a challenge. If you want something badly enough, you must work for it.” Nerina stopped an inch away from him and looked directly into his eyes. “Don’t you want me?”

“Christ, Nerina.” Watching her parade in front of him with another man’s name on her tongue was more than he could take. He had to taste her again. She gasped in surprise, but her lips moved, kissing him back. She moaned, and he held her tighter. He heard another short intake of breath as her hips connected with his, and he tried to pull himself back.

But she didn’t push him away. Her hands wove into his hair again, tugging him closer. He licked at her lips, running his tongue over the wine-scented flesh. She opened under him and he feasted.

They came up for air at the same time, and he leaned his forehead against hers, not wanting to lose contact with her skin.

“I still can’t sleep with you,” she said, the breath shuddering out of her.

“I know. I’m only helping you with your act as mistress.” They grinned at each other and the new camaraderie eased the heat.

“Is that what you call this? Rehearsal?”

“If you like. Shall I help you go deeper into your role?”

Nerina threw her head back and laughed when he nuzzled her throat. They

parted, though not far, this time with companionship between them.

"You must still stay here tonight."

"But there are things at home I must collect first."

He shook his head. "It's too late tonight. I'll take you in the morning." She twisted her hands together and he frowned.

"What's wrong, Nerina? Is someone waiting for you?" An ugly, heavy feeling landed on his heart. Jealousy? No. Certainly not.

"Well, no. Not exactly," she hedged. He let her pace for a moment, realizing that when she worried, she walked. He would need new carpets if she stayed long enough.

"How do you feel about cats, Domenico?"

Trust Nerina to say exactly the opposite of what he expected. "Cats? They're rat killers."

"What about cats as pets?"

"Are you telling me you have a cat waiting for you at home?" The anchor on his chest floated away.

"Probably not at home. Not right this moment. She's usually out until dawn, catching her supper. Oh Domenico," she said, rushing to him. "I can't bear to leave her on her own. I've had her since she was only a tiny kitten."

"It's fine, Nerina. Bring the beast if it makes you happy."

She beamed at him, and he beamed back, pleased that such a small thing contented her. This was how it started, he realized. He'd seen men become besotted with their mistresses before, indulging their every whim and he'd never understood them. He did now.

None of the servants were awake, so he showed her to a small suite of rooms connected to his own. Her eyes widened at the ornate decorations.

"My parents originally had these apartments before they moved to Florence. My mother decorated them."

"Oh," she said, averting her eyes from the large half-tester bed. The curtains and spread were covered in orange and purple stripes. "It's...nice."

"It's hideous, Nerina. She's never been able to tell red from purple or green from orange."

"Thank God. I was afraid I was going to have to be polite." She walked over to the bed and ran her hands over the cover with her eyes closed. "It feels wonderful, though."

"I'm glad you like it." He tried to hide his reaction as he watched her touch the soft fabric. "Perhaps cat hair will improve it."

"Thank you again for that, Domenico. I don't have much, but Giada is important to me." Her eyes lowered, and he was hard put to see this shy girl as the woman who had kissed him so passionately only moments before. "*Buona notte.*"

"If you need anything, my rooms are next door. *Buona notte,*" he said, closing the door behind him.

He shook his head. He couldn't decide if he should feel glad to have her near or disgusted that he was going to bed alone. He was supposed to get revenge and some physical release. Instead, he ended up with a virgin who he prayed could hold up her act. Actually, he thought she might be able to pull it off for a little while. Just long enough to trap Terullio. And drive him insane with lust.

There was a perfect body underneath those layers of clothing. Domenico wished now he'd taken the opportunity to slide his fingers over her breasts or cup her ass in his hands. This wouldn't do at all, he decided. He headed into his room to see if the water in his basin was cold enough to convince his brain to travel north again.

Chapter Four

Nerina twisted and fought with the ties at the back of her gown. When she'd put it on this evening, she thought she'd have some help getting it off. If not, then at home she had a small hook set up on her bed frame to help unbind the knots. But here? Alone?

She ached to be out of the dress. It pulled too tightly across the chest, and all evening she'd prayed that she wouldn't split a seam. Or worse yet, simply burst out the top.

Now she was afraid that if she gave up and slept in it, the fabric would be crushed and ruined by morning. She exhaled and slumped her shoulders. Once again, she was out of options.

She opened her door quietly and looked out into the hall. There were no servants about, but a sliver of light spread from under the door next to hers. Domenico was still awake.

She crept out and tapped on his door, certain that the rustling of her skirts sounded as loud as a cart rumbling by on the street.

He yanked the door open, and she stumbled through, falling into his arms. He pulled her close, and she stared up into his face.

"Nerina, *cara*, what are you doing here? I'm so glad you came."

Oh, this was a bad idea. His tantalizing lips came closer, but she hadn't come here to be seduced. Had she?

"I... I can't untie my bodice." She pushed back, and he let go. Domenico stood only in his linen *camicia* and hose, and the long shirt tented out impressively at his

groin.

She spun abruptly and pulled her hair over her shoulder, presenting him with her back. She was on fire with embarrassment and something else that crept through her insides, settling low in her belly.

"Your bodice," he repeated slowly. "I see. I think I can help you with that." One finger touched her spine and she hissed in a great breath. "Sorry. Did that tickle?"

"N-no. I mean...yes. I mean...the tie. There's a knot." She swallowed convulsively as he chuckled. Nerina could feel his breath on her skin, and she shivered.

Warm hands gripped her waist as he searched for the problem. "What? There really is a knot."

"Of course there's a knot," she said, half turning around. "That's why I came in here. What did you think?"

"Nothing! I thought..." He cleared his throat. "Let's see if I can fix it." She faced forward again and waited. The muted touch of his fingers tortured her. She locked her knees to stop them from melting.

"It's tough," he said. His voice came from around her waist, and she raised her arm to see him where he knelt at her side. Hair as black as night curled over the tops of his ears. "I think I can get it," he said, pulling on one end of the silk tie. His face was so close his warm breath souged through the layers of fabric. She swallowed a whimper.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm fine. Are you done?"

"Almost. How did it get so tangled?"

"I don't know," she said, just as he smiled in triumph.

"It's done!"

It certainly was. She had undone all the other ties on her bodice and when this one loosened, the entire piece slithered down. Nerina's heart pounded. She was certain the unsteady rhythm shook the loose, low neck of her sheer *camicia*. Tension held her arms rigid and she stared at Domenico, still kneeling at her side, eyes nearly level with her unbound breasts.

As if he held a magnet precisely tuned for her, she leaned forward at the same time he did. The *camicia* offered no protection when he placed his lips on her breast. After being so tightly constrained for so long, the rush of sensation overwhelmed her, and she cried out.

More. She wanted more. Nerina plunged her fingers into his hair and pulled him closer. He responded by wrapping one arm around her hips and using the other to tug her shift lower, baring her skin to him.

"Yes, please," she gasped, grateful for the support of his arm.

He played with her nipple, licking and sucking at it. Every flick of his tongue felt like flame against her skin, and she pressed in. He switched his attention to her other breast now, using his hand to mold her flesh, squeezing until the pleasure spiraled throughout her body. The first wave of dampness seeped from her womb, preparing her to join with him.

Domenico rose to his feet, lifting her and walking backwards until they reached the bed.

"Nerina, I'm so glad you came to me. I want you so much." She could barely hear him for the roaring in her ears as he lay down with her, pushing her sleeves down until her elbows were trapped in the linen. He moved so that he kneeled above her and stripped off his shirt. Nerina nearly swallowed her tongue.

Madre di Maria. He was beautiful. His skin had a golden glow in the candlelight, showing off the hard muscles of his arms. Black curls nestled in a rough triangle over his chest, inviting her to bury her nose in the warmth above his heart. His hands moved to her waist to undo the fastenings of her skirt.

"You didn't have to tie such a knot in your bodice just to have an excuse to come to my rooms," he said as he bent to spread a string of kisses across her collarbone. Willingly trapped, Nerina could only lie back and enjoy the sensation of his gentle lips. Sensation, however, didn't shut off her brain.

"I didn't," she gasped as he licked at the tiny hollow in the base of her throat.

"Didn't what, *mia dolcezza*?"

"Didn't tie the knot."

"Nerina, why did you come to my room?" Domenico slowly lifted himself, and a breeze touched all the wet spots on her skin, chilling her.

She struggled with her sleeves for a moment and he helped her pull them to her shoulders. She propped herself on her elbows to scowl at him.

"Because I couldn't undo the knot in my dress, Domenico. Did you really think that I would come here to be seduced after what I told you?" She squirmed out from beneath him, and he let her. "Do you really think I'm that fickle? That changeable?"

Nerina scooped up her abandoned bodice and held it in front of her like armor. How dare he make her feel those things? Make her lose control like that? This whole rotten situation was entirely his fault. The effort of not wanting him made her head ache, but it was for the best. It had to be.

"I am staying, Signore Venieri, because I need Camaro Terullio to be well and truly powerless so I can be safe in my own city. I may even be staying to repay a little vengeance for your sister. But I am *not* staying to be your plaything!" She slammed the door behind her.

* * * *

Domenico opened the door after her. "You're no fun to play with anyway!" He slammed it shut again. The slam was very satisfying. Not as satisfying as burying his face in her beautiful warm breasts and... Fickle woman. First she invents a stupid excuse for him to undress her, then she accuses him of being like Terullio! What the hell did she want from him, anyway?

* * * *

Nerina stamped back to her room and slammed the door again. And she paced. Arrogant man. He actually thought she would tie herself in knots just to go see him?

Hah! She spotted herself in the small mirror above the dresser. Her nipples were clearly visible through the damp linen of her *camicia*. They still throbbed. She pressed her palms over them, trying to mute the pleasure she remembered. Was her virginity worth all this trouble?

She was never going to get to sleep tonight. Hurriedly, she removed her clothing and hung it neatly, even the shift. Nerina had learned her way around her body when she figured out what her mother did for a living. All the pleasure couldn't be on the man's side, surely. Tonight, she approached the process of finding ease in a workmanlike way, one hand on her bosom, one on her mound.

This was not about Domenico, she told herself. Nothing to do with him at all. Yet as she moved her fingers, she discovered she was still wet from his ministrations. The memory of his mouth on her body came back and, in the darkness of her room, she let herself smile.

* * * *

Domenico stuck his head in the basin and poured water over the back of his neck. Nothing. Dammit. He was so hard, it hurt. He'd never get to sleep tonight. He dried his hair, then yanked off his hose. The linen towel stayed in his hand as he stalked to the bed.

As he grasped his cock, a wave of sadness rushed through him. He hated doing this. Hated spilling his seed in an empty, meaningless gesture. Domenico closed his eyes as he stroked himself and saw a vision of Nerina, breasts bare, hair disheveled, eyes wild with desire. The hand on his shaft wasn't his anymore, but hers, and it didn't take long before their cries mingled together in his mind.

His eyes flew open. What was that sound?

Chapter Five

Domenico grabbed his rumpled shirt from the floor and put it on, then slid his rapier from its sheath. Very slowly, he opened the door. Nerina's door opened, too, and she crept into the hall, also clad only in her *camicia*. Thank God he'd just relieved himself of that frustration, he thought as bright moonlight from the window outlined her splendid figure. Still, his cock made a valiant effort. He ignored it and pulled her to him so he could whisper into her ear.

"What are you doing, woman? Get back to your room."

"No." In her right hand, something glittered. "Did you hear something, too?"

A board creaked downstairs. A board everyone in the house knew about, so it had to be a stranger, not simply one of the servants up for an assignation or a late meal.

He pulled her left hand to his hip. "Step where I step and keep your eyes open." She nodded and pressed her slender fingers into his flesh.

Together, they made their way down the staircase. A glimmer of light showed under the door of his office. They weren't here for money or jewels. The thief knew what he wanted. With Terullio in the city, the coincidence was just too great.

With a motion to Nerina to stay where she stood, Domenico slammed open the door, sword at the ready. The invader was startled from his task—rifling through the stacks of parchment in the drawer where Domenico kept his maps. The criminal slowly drew his sword, more of a dagger, and certainly more useful in the close quarters of his office. Domenico wished he had grabbed his own dagger, but knew that he could best the ruffian no matter the weapon. Years of experience and practice had taught him much, and he didn't bother to fight like a gentleman. He fought to win.

He concentrated on the knave before him, but was distracted by a half-scream, quickly muffled. He looked away and the burglar rewarded him with a stinging slash on his forearm. What he saw compelled him to close the argument quickly. He waited for an opening, and it wasn't long in coming. The thief was no swordsman. Domenico didn't hesitate to run him through, letting the housebreaker slide off the tip of his sword.

He turned to the more serious matter. A much larger man had grabbed Nerina and held her still with a hand over her mouth and one around her body. The swine leered as he roughly grabbed her breast and gave it a cruel squeeze. She thrashed in his arms, and tears sprang to her eyes.

The lout had to die. Domenico raised his blade, looking for an opening when he saw the glitter in Nerina's hand. She brought her arm up and stabbed it down onto her assailant's thigh.

He yelled and shoved her away, his hand pressing a widening red stain on his leg. Domenico leapt forward, pushing the tip of his sword against the man's filthy neck.

"Who sent you?"

The thug spat. Domenico pressed harder.

"I said, who sent you?" He pulled the very edge of the blade along the man's skin. A thin line of red followed. Finally, the thief swallowed heavily.

"Terullio."

"What did he want?" Again, the scum refused to answer. Domenico had reached the end of his patience. His arm stung where it had been cut, and he had to check on Nerina. She must be collapsing from terror by now.

Then he saw her approach the man. A tiny, jeweled blade caught the moonlight.

"*Il signore* asked you a question," she said, placing the very tip of that extremely sharp blade at the bottom of his stained doublet. With deliberate flicks, she cut away the slops at the top of his hose.

This was his virgin courtesan? Her hair was disheveled, and her eyes were wild, just as in his fantasy. Even her shift hung off one shoulder. But the stiletto in her hand

promised pain, not pleasure. The maggot's balls were tight against his body and his dick had shrunk to the size of a boy's.

He tried to bluff. "You're not going to use that. You're a woman."

"You have it backwards. I *will* use it — *because* I'm a woman."

The hypnotic motion of her knife left beguilingly bloody traces on the man's crotch. He squealed like a pig. Domenico smiled, and *il porco* paled further.

"I'm content to watch her play, signore. Or you could answer the question. What does Terullio want?"

"Maps! He wants maps! Of your trade routes!"

"That's ridiculous. Why?"

"I don't know why. He only told us to steal maps of the Veneto and the land routes your wagons take into Dalmatia and Bohemia."

Domenico pulled back. Nerina took her cue from him and stepped away, letting the brute sidle away from her, grabbing at the gaping front of his hose.

"Take that filth with you," he reminded the thief, pointing to the corpse of his companion.

Domenico put out his hand and pulled Nerina to him, her back to his chest. He swept a length of hair off her neck and tasted her skin, claiming her in front of the hired thug. Her head fell back against him in a wanton display and he held her tighter, pressing his hips into the soft cushion of her ass. He knew Terullio would hear every detail of the night's adventures and wanted to be sure the bastard understood.

"Tell your master that I use the open trade routes. I just have the loyalty of my people. Terullio knows nothing of loyalty, and *that* is why he fails. Tell him also that I keep what's mine." He pointed his rapier, crimson in the moonlight. "Now get out."

The vermin fled, taking his dead partner with him. Nerina sank against his body and he held her tightly. Hugged her. He, who had not hugged a woman since he left his mother and sisters, held her for comfort's sake only. Now he needed the safety of an embrace — and wanted to provide the same bulwark for her.

"*Vita mia*, are you all right? Did he hurt you?" Domenico passed his hands over

her body, looking for injury. He cupped her tender breast in his hand and soothed the spot where that unwashed scum had touched her. She gasped and put her hand over his.

"I'm fine, Domenico. But look at you," she exclaimed, motioning to the blood on his sleeve. "Are you badly injured? Open and close your hand." Since his hand was still conveniently holding the weight of her breast, he did, and grinned when she sucked in a breath that pushed more of her flesh into his palm.

"You can't be hurt too badly if you're still thinking of that," she said archly. She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. "*Dio mio*. I've never been so frightened in my life."

"Shh now, *mia tresora*. It's over." He tucked a finger under her chin and lifted her face. Somehow he had moved from stark lust to genuine tenderness in the space of a few terrifying minutes. He laid his lips on hers, and she kissed him back. Sweetly, simply. A curious ache began in his chest that had nothing to do with his injury. The kiss ended, and she drew back softly.

Nerina wiped her cheeks on her sleeves and clucked at him like a mother hen as she led him upstairs into her room.

"Sit there, on the bed."

Domenico moved back, propping himself against the pillows. Her body was a thing of beauty as he watched her move. She rolled up his sleeve and hissed in sympathy at the sight. He barely felt it, in truth, but he didn't dare say so for fear that she might leave him. She dampened a towel and dabbed at the wound, cleaning away the blood until only the cut showed red.

"At home, I have a salve my father made. It's good for cuts. He used oil of rose and turpentine. Add egg yolks, use a clean bandage, and you'll be healed in no time."

"Egg yolks? Turpentine?"

She grinned at him. "I know it sounds odd, but it works."

"We'll fetch it in the morning when we go to your house," he said as she wrapped his arm loosely in linen. He pulled her up until she lay across his chest. She

warmed him, comforted him.

Domenico had known beautiful women, talented women, all his life. Women who could make him laugh and women who took care of his needs. But this woman was above rubies and more, because she also made him care.

He'd never been so terrified in his life as when he saw her in the arms of that thief. And he'd never been so proud of anyone when he saw her take vengeance into her own hands. A true Venetian—she understood how to do what was necessary to get what was needed.

Yet now she was entirely feminine, soft and sweet in his arms. He listened as her even breathing warmed his collarbone, then joined her in sleep.

Chapter Six

Nerina awoke early, expecting Giada's nudge. Instead, she found herself snuggled with her back against a wall of blasting heat. Bliss. Even her toes were warm for a change.

She couldn't decide whether to be horrified or content and so settled for a middle ground of telling herself she would move if he did. After all, she didn't want to wake him, she thought piously.

Things were different now. In one night she had changed professions twice. Or was it three times? From devoted daughter and alchemist's assistant to almost courtesan to pretend mistress. She'd made a deadly enemy and threatened a man with emasculation. And she'd been kissed. Oh, how she'd been kissed.

Domenico twitched and shifted his legs, insinuating one knee between hers. Under her shift, she felt the lips of her sex part with the movement, drawing her memory back to the kiss – and what came after.

In the hazy pre-dawn gray, she allowed herself the truth. She'd wanted him last night, but the quixotic morality of her upbringing muddled her desire. Last night had been the perfect opportunity to let go the strictures of her parents – adoring hypocrites – and abandon herself to hedonism. She might have, but for the immovable idea that losing her virginity shouldn't also mean losing her pride when he thought she had schemed to get into his room.

She sighed and began to caress the hand that held her close. Something had changed when she brought him back to her room to tend his wound. He treated her then as something precious. What had he called her? *Mia tresora*. My treasure. How she

wished it were true.

He was a good man. A patient, intelligent and cunning man. A son who adored his mother despite her appalling taste in décor. A brother who avenged his sister's tragedy. A true nobleman who treated his partner in this odd venture with care and tenderness, though he received no reward other than a clean bandage.

His very nobility made her realize that a liaison between them could only lead to heartbreak. His family would forbid any union with her other than this illicit one. She was good enough to be his lover, but never his wife. Even if he broke with his family, which she would never ask of him, no priest would sanctify such a wedding.

An aristocrat and a whore walked into a church...

She choked back a laugh that was half a sob at the unfinishable joke. The sound made him stir. His hand moved. A finger stroked the underside of her breast, and the wanton side of her burst into life. If only she knew what to do to make him continue.

Nerina hummed, low in her throat. Not loudly enough to break the silence of the room, but the sound passed between them, enveloped in bed curtains, cut off from the world. His hand moved more boldly now, holding the weight of her breast in his palm as his thumb slid over the filmy *camicia*, dragging the fabric over the sensitive tip until the rasping of linen on flesh tore a soft cry from her.

"Nerina," he whispered. "Are you sure you want this?"

She turned in his arms and slid her hand through his chest hair. "Oh yes, Domenico. I'm sure." Their kiss was a small explosion, as if someone had lit a barrel of black powder. No, not gunpowder. Greek fire. This flame would burn until there was nothing left to feed it. His hands slid down her side and back up, pulling her shift until he touched the bare skin of her hip. An unfamiliar urgency overtook him. He kissed her harder and harder until he thought the only way to get enough would be to swallow her whole. He forced himself to pull back.

"I should go more slowly. I *want* to go slowly, to savor you, but you've driven me half mad already."

"And it's not even full daylight. Imagine what I could do to you by noon." She

laughed at his urgency, though he could see the fire in her eyes.

More kisses followed, some wildly luscious, some of almost chaste adoration. He couldn't get enough of the taste and feel of her skin, and as one hand bared her body below the waist, the other stripped the gown from her shoulders, pushing it down so he could see all of her. Finally, the linen gathered around her middle in a thin bunch. He ripped his own shirt off, eager to feel her skin against his.

Nerina was a banquet set before a starving man. The outrageous curves of her breasts spilled over her skin in luscious abandon, and he bent to his meal with a will. Under his onslaught, she writhed, gasping, mewling, almost weeping. Nips on the very tips of her breasts, succulent as the juicy, crisp seeds of a pomegranate, brought her half off the bed.

As a reward, Domenico attached his mouth to the unfathomably smooth skin at the side of her breast and sucked hard, leaving a bright mark.

"Mine," he growled, both shocked and proud of his bestial gesture. He rose to kneel above his handiwork, and the object of his lust began a salacious wiggle, pulling the bunched fabric of her *camicia* down her legs before she tossed it over the side of the bed.

"Yours?" she questioned, also coming to her knees. They were almost of a height this way and she looked straight into his eyes and licked her lips. "You have had many women, Domenico Venieri, but today you are mine. My first lover." She licked his throat where the tendons jutted out, before sucking the skin between her teeth, biting down, drawing all the sensation in his body to that one spot before she let him go.

"You are mine."

He reached for her, filling his hands with the hot, soft flesh of her ass and pulled her close. His cock was sandwiched between their bellies, and she ground herself into him with a wicked chuckle.

"I propose we share," he said, before he claimed her mouth again. His arms were long, and they swept down, pulling her thighs apart. His fingers brushed over her hot, wet slit, and he smiled darkly at her. One hand moved around her hip and delved into

her sweetness from the front, spreading liquid fire over his fingers as he grazed the sensitive pearl over and over.

He delved into her with a finger, and she sucked in a breath. Her legs spread and she whimpered, so he moved his hand again, pushing deeper. Tight, so tight. He imagined how she would feel clamped around his hard flesh, but then had to change his focus before he came in her hands.

Because her fingers were also busy. One hand grasped his cock softly, while the other cupped his balls. The hand on his shaft slid up until she swirled her thumb over the drop of lust that beaded on the head. He dropped his forehead to her shoulder and lowered her back down to the bed.

"Don't, Nerina," he said, pulling away from her talented fingers.

"Why not? Doesn't it feel good?"

"It feels too good right now. Only let me..." He wanted to take care of her. This woman wasn't just an empty vessel, a plaything to be used and then passed on. He needed her to walk into the fire with him and see if they came out on the other side together.

Domenico slid another finger into the wet velvet of her body and turned his hand, rubbing against the top of her womb from the inside as he pressed rhythmically on the hooded bit of flesh with his thumb.

"Come for me, *cara mia*," he whispered as his fingers were suddenly gripped in a vise. She bowed up, legs spread wantonly, breasts swaying, glistening with a sheen of delicate sweat. Her throat worked, but only a hoarse scream—his name—escaped her lips.

Gently, gently, he disengaged, pulling his hand from her body. The pulse in his thumb beat now in time with the throb of her swollen bead. He raised his thumb to his lips and kissed it, tasting the sweet liquid of her release.

She lay before him now, limp and sated, and he leaned over to kiss her lips. Her response was a mere flutter, and when he pulled back, her eyes were wet with tears.

"I didn't know, Domenico. I didn't know it could be like that."

He could die happy right now, hard as a rock and completely in love. And he was. The realization came as naturally and gracefully as a porpoise slicing through the waves. Somewhere in the last few hours, his heart had slid into her hands. Now all that remained was to see if she would give hers in return.

* * * *

That sensation, as if all the blood in her body rushed to her womb and then boiled away in a gigantic explosion. Never in all her explorations had Nerina encountered that sensation before. And she had the feeling that no matter what she did in the future, she would never have it again unless Domenico was there with her.

She was exhausted now, as if she had fought another battle and won again, but the insistent memory of Domenico's shaft in her hands teased her into wakefulness. There was pleasure to give and to receive, and she wanted very much to be the one who pleased him.

He had rolled over onto his back, breathing almost as hard as she, and she leaned over his chest. A hard brown nipple poked at her chin, and she licked it, liking the texture under her tongue. He startled, then relaxed as she licked again. Her hand traveled across the soft blanket of lightly curling hair until her thumb strummed the other nub in time to her gentle suckling. Domenico's hands turned into fists, gathering up the sheets in great wads as she licked and nipped at him.

Nerina's fingers left off playing with his chest and traced a firm path down the middle of his body. She wasn't subtle. She knew what she wanted and sighed when she finally had him in her palm.

Domenico propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her.

"What are you doing, Nerina?"

"I'm touching you. And I'm having fun," she replied, a bit of playful defiance in her voice.

"Fun, eh?" He dropped back down. "Fine. Play for a while, little girl. Then I will

teach you how to be a woman." She bit him on the nipple, then laughed when he jerked away.

"You'll teach me? I think I already know a lot about being a woman." Touching him brought back all that wonderful tension in her body. Domenico held the only key for relieving it, and she didn't feel like playing anymore.

Nerina sat up and swung a leg over his hip, crouching over him. His hands went to her hips, and his fingers dug in. She leaned over and kissed him, wet and hard, spearing her tongue into his mouth as he had done to her earlier. He sucked it in, and she whimpered at the answering tug in her core.

Like a magnet to a lodestone, Nerina shifted her body until the head of his cock brushed her entrance.

"Teach me, Domenico. Teach me if you can." She lowered her body onto his, eyes widening as he parted her tight flesh. His thumbs crushed her hip bones as she continued her downward push. She winced as something inside her gave, and with a final plunge, he was all the way in.

It hurt. This wasn't anything like what she had imagined with his fingers. Domenico's fingers relaxed, and he brushed her hair back over her shoulder. "*Cara mia*, are you all right?"

"Fine," she gritted.

"You don't look fine, Nerina. Let me help you." He sat up, and the pressure eased a bit. She no longer felt as painfully full.

"Oh yes, thank you." A quick sob of breath escaped her, and she hugged him tight, feeling his arms wrap around her. He kissed her, and somehow, that made the ache between her legs fade even more.

"I'm sorry, *preziosa*. I didn't realize how much it would hurt."

"It's all right. I feel much better now." So much better, in fact, that she tried a simple movement, a forward slide. Somehow, that little slip rubbed her against a sensitive spot, and she gasped. He did, too.

"Good?" he asked.

"Yes, very good. I may try that again."

"Please do." He moved his hands so they cupped her bottom, and she slid again. They both groaned.

And so it began. She arched her back, and he licked the valley between her breasts. She bent further, and he caught a nipple in his mouth. The ache was gone in moments, and from the urgent grip of his hands, he enjoyed the movement as much as she did. Every wet, slippery grind of flesh on flesh rewound the tension in her womb until it spread to the rest of her body. Soon she was helpless, a prisoner to the beat of their blood, the rhythm of their hips.

He lay back, and this time, as he speared into her deeply, the pressure only increased her pleasure instead of bringing her pain. She dropped forward, bracing her hands on his shoulders as they continued the relentless climb to pleasure.

"Nerina?" he called out. "Nerina, I..."

"Oh God, yes. More!"

He moved his hands to her shoulders, pressing her down, impaling her more deeply on his cock, forcing her to spread wider and open herself to even more sensation. She gave a gasping scream, a spasm overtaking her so that she went wild, seeking more and more until there was no more to find.

He bucked and plunged into her body until he went rigid, jerking as a hot wash flooded her.

The room was silent but for their harsh breathing. Then she whimpered.

"*Mi amore*, are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

Nerina shook her head, a tiny motion, but it was all she had the energy for.

"No," she whispered. "It was..." She couldn't begin to describe what had happened to her. How the pleasure in her body and the joy in her soul had spiraled into a moment of absolute clarity. For this man, she would risk heartbreak.

For this man, she would risk it all and be glad she had known love when it was all over.

Chapter Seven

"Giada?" called Nerina, waiting for the familiar sight of a small tortoiseshell body pattering toward her. The sound was swallowed by the noise of Venice awakening. Just on the other side of the building, they could hear the market, already busy. The scents of fresh-caught fish and strong soap battled for prominence.

Signora Parrisi, hanging her wash on the line strung between two buildings, stuck her head out the window and yelled down, "You look so pretty, Nerina. Just like your mother, God rest her soul. Have you seen the rag man yet?"

"Not yet, signora. It's only Monday. He won't come until tomorrow." Giada slipped out of the shadows and wound around Nerina's ankles, scolding her loudly for the night's abandonment. Nerina picked her up and buried her nose in the little cat's neck before she waved goodbye to Signora Parrisi and unlocked the door.

Wary after last night's attack, they had traveled to the working class district under heavy guard. Men flanked the building while she and Domenico entered.

"I can see where she got her name," said Domenico as he dangled his fingers in front of the cat. Giada—with her jade colored eyes—sniffed him delicately before she bumped him with her head, demanding to be petted.

The little apartment was scrupulously tidy. And scandalously bare. There was almost no furniture left, and the walls had a pattern of lighter patches where art and tapestries had been removed.

She couldn't look at him. Day by day, she had grown used to the empty rooms, the cold floors, the chinks in the walls. But now that she had slept again in a home furnished with love, if not with an eye for color, all that she had lost pained her more

keenly.

A large wooden box banded with iron sat like a squat troll against the wall, and into this, Nerina dove, searching for her father's salve. Once the chest had many cousins, all containing various bits and pieces of notes and scrolls. Laboratory equipment had covered the tables and bound books had fought for shelf space. No more. One by one, box by box, his things had been sold to repay debts, then simply to survive. The lone coffer now contained the few items that had been too precious—or too worthless—to sell.

Domenico's arms reached around her, and his voice was husky in her ear.

"Gather what you need for now, Nerina. Vittorio will bring the rest." She reached up behind her to rest a palm on his cheek, and he turned his head to kiss it.

They stood, gazing out of the large window that overlooked the Rialto Bridge and the bustling market on the other side of the canal. In the frosty air, wives and maids did their daily shopping, while burly men tossed crates of food, both exotic and ordinary, up to the waiting stallholders.

"Papa loved watching the world pass by his window."

"It's an interesting view," said Domenico, turning her in his arms. "But not as nice as the one I have now." He picked her up, and she laughed as he stumbled backwards.

"Not as light as I look, am..." The shattering of glass interrupted her question. The bolt of a crossbow thudded into the wall, right where a portrait of her mother used to hang. Shouts and the clash of iron mingled with heavy footsteps as battle erupted around them. He thrust her behind him as two men broke past the guards at the door. One of them was Camaro Terullio, his blade gleaming vermilion, his teeth bared in the savage joy of bloodletting.

Domenico, fully armed this time with both rapier and short sword, leapt into the fray. Nerina watched, paralyzed with terror. Terullio swiped at him, and the brown sleeve of her lover's doublet bloomed red. There was nothing she could do. Nothing that wouldn't break his concentration. But she could draw off one of his assailants. She

yanked down the sleeves of her gown and squeezed her arms together—a move guaranteed to attract attention.

“Signore Terullio,” she called out, leaning forward, her fingers sweeping along her exposed flesh. It worked. Terullio disengaged from the fight with Domenico and stalked toward her.

“You! Whore!” he said, pointing the tip of his blade at her. “You’re going to pay for what you did to me!”

“That little love tap? That was only to get your interest.” The blade wavered...lowered. She couldn’t lose him, had to keep him focused on her.

“But it didn’t work, did it?” she asked, licking her lips. “You let me leave, and I went home with Signore Venieri. He was very generous to me, though.” Nerina straightened, keeping her elbows tight to her body. Her fingers trailed down her bodice, framing a large ruby centered in the rudely gaping décolletage of the dress.

“Could you be so generous, signore?”

Terullio’s eyes followed where she led, watching so closely they could easily have dropped down her cleavage. Her seemingly aimless meandering brought them to the far corner of the room, well away from Domenico and his men, who were still fighting. She didn’t dare look, didn’t dare take her gaze from Terullio. Any glance might betray them.

“I could be *more* generous. I can take everything he has—including you.” He stood closer now and the rancid odor of his body turned her stomach. “I will take you, but not until you’ve learned a few lessons.”

Nerina’s smile faltered, but she poured more into it.

“I love to learn, signore.” She steeled herself for the blow she saw coming, but it spun her around all the same. The square signet ring he wore smashed into her cheek, and the plaster wall cracked where her head bounced off. She fell to her knees, struggling to breathe through the blinding pain.

“I would take you from him and keep you, not for the pleasure of bedding you, but for the fun of beating you.” He raised the hand again, this time prepared to strike

her a backhanded slap. Nerina blindly yanked the jeweled stiletto out of its sheath in her bodice and held it in front of her. Terullio laughed, an ugly sound like the end of the world in her ringing ears.

"A toy." The monster took a step forward, ignoring her weapon. "I know what you did to Luca with that blade last night. I finished the job for you this morning. He cried like a little girl when I cut off his *coglione* and threw them in the canal."

Blood pooled in her mouth, and she spat at him. "Finally, you did the world a favor."

"Venieri's sister tried waving a stiletto at me, too. I took it from her, and she screamed and screamed while I fucked her. Will you scream, t..." His foul words broke off with a gag. A tiny spot of blood sprouted on his chest and he tottered forward, straight onto the stiletto's wicked point. He was pinned fore and aft with Nerina's weapon skewering his chest and Domenico's dagger buried in his back.

"*Per mia sorella*," hissed Domenico as he yanked the blade out. "*E per mia amore*." Terullio gasped, a final rattling choke, and sank to his knees. As he fell over, Nerina's knife slid out of his heart. Blood splashed her fingers.

Domenico reached out a hand and Nerina took it. His chest heaved, red stains spattered his clothes, and his face looked like Nerina's felt. Her blade—a last bequest from her mother—was too sticky to return to its sheath in her bodice. She bent down very gingerly. The world swam for a moment, but when it righted itself, she wiped the knife off on Terullio's hose. The stiletto slid home.

"How are you?" he asked as he slid an arm under her shoulder. She wrapped hers around his waist, and they propped each other up to survey the damage.

Terullio and his men lay dead as Domenico's guards came limping back into the apartment. Giada pattered down from a high shelf and shook her paws daintily as she crossed the floor to her mistress. She stopped to sniff at Terullio's body, sneezed in disgust and leapt into Nerina's arms.

Grazie Dio. She couldn't have leaned down to pick up the little creature. "There's blood on her claws." Giada nuzzled her for a moment, then began to lick her paws.

"The cat is as wily as her mistress," said Domenico, gently gathering them close. "Terullio had hired himself a real fighter over there. He almost had me when she landed on his head and scratched up his face. It gave me an opportunity to get inside his guard."

"Thank God for that, too." She was tired. Tired in her soul. Her head lolled against his shoulder, and she was grateful for the solid strength of his body.

"Nerina, *amore mia*, thank God for you. If you hadn't drawn Terullio away from me, I would be dead. And you..." He shook her. "What the hell were you thinking? You could have been killed! Don't ever do anything like that again! I don't even want to think about what might have happened to you."

She smiled sleepily. Domenico squeezed her in a desperate embrace. *Mmmm. He was warm.*

The landlady found them like that, leaning on each other and stroking the cat. Domenico's men were carrying out the bodies and smears of blood adorned the floor and walls. She screamed and ran out, calling for the *guardie*. Then she ran back in and shrieked at them all.

"Get out, you...*prostituta*! You're no better than your mother was! Take that creature of yours and never come back!" She spun on her heel and marched out the door. They could hear her carrying on in the street, but no one paid attention.

"It sounds like you're homeless," said Domenico. He wiped away a smear of blood on her cheek.

"Mmm-hmm." She kissed his scraped knuckles. The cat licked them, too.

"Ouch." He smoothed her hair back and rubbed his fingers into her skull. "No money," he continued.

"No." The massage turned her knees to soft wax.

"No family around." His hands traveled down, pressing into the muscles around her spine and she groaned in bliss.

"None." She leaned in to kiss his neck.

"Any friends?" He held her close, his heart drumming in her ear.

"Just the one." She hung on to his shoulders, trying to crawl inside his skin.

"Any lovers?" He grinned.

"Just the one." She grinned back.

"You don't sound like a very successful courtesan." Behind the grin, tenderness lurked.

"I'm afraid not." Her heart was near to bursting with love.

"Do you think you'd be a good wife?"

Nerina jerked back.

"Domenico, have you gone mad? What will your family think? Did you forget the part about being a courtesan?"

"Certainly not. Consider me a client for life." He hugged her tightly and she let him, terrified and giddy. "You saved me, Nerina. You saved my life and you saved my soul. My family is going to love you." He held her waist, looking down at her with soft fire in his eyes. "I love you. *Ti amo, Nerina. Per sempre.* Will you marry me?" He got his answer in a kiss, punctuated by laughter and smiles.

A good wife, certainly. And always a good Venetian.

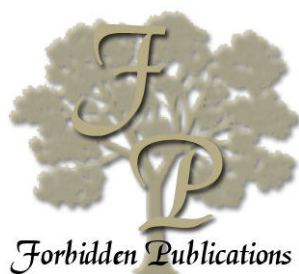
"Do I get to keep my stiletto?"

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Sela Carsen

<http://www.selacarsen.com/>

Sela Carsen was born in Houston, Texas, but as the daughter of an oil company engineer and then an Air Force wife, she's lived all over the world. She has a bachelor's degree in French and another in Communication. She has worked as a tutor, a reporter, a magazine writer, at an advertising agency and at an airline ticket counter. While they were stationed in England, she began to write romances. Now, she makes her home in the Midwest with her husband, two children, and one Boxer.



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