

# QUARTETTO



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BY

A.J. LLEWELLYN &  
STEPHANI HECHT

## DEDICATION

*AJ: To Herve for always being my inspiration and to  
My Stephani for saying, Yes.*

*Stephani: To AJ for asking in the first place and to my  
buddy, Ava March. Thanks for joining me on the dark  
side.*

## CHAPTER ONE

*Isola del Lazzaretto Nuovo. August 27, 1576*

She couldn't breathe. She coughed, but no sound came out. She gagged as the strange feeling of something lodging in her throat forced open her swollen eyes. She found herself staring up into the face of a huge, beaked bird. Its cruel, enormous beak dipped down to her. Wait...no, not a bird. She was looking up into the mask of a *pizzicamorti*, a gravedigger.

His black, waxy clothing smelled strongly of Juniper berries. She knew well the scent of the protective herbs packed into the hooked beak now inches from her face. His red-gloved fingers poked at her teeth as he packed more dirt into her open mouth.

Her eyes burned at the bright daylight. She gagged on the dirt, could feel it trickling into her throat, could not stop herself from swallowing it. She couldn't stop it from falling into her ears and eyes as the *pizzicamorti* grunted in his haste to get the job done. She tried to move her head, to avoid more punishment. Tears rolled out of her eyes and

into her ears. Her blocked nose left her choking, her scream silent as he knelt right on her chest and forced her jaw open even wider, trying to stuff a brick down her throat.

Caprice's body tried to fight this terrible thing he was doing to her, but she couldn't feel her hands. One came free from beneath her body and she clawed at him like a small, frightened animal.

The *pizzicamorti* stopped. Brick in hand, his beaked head came close to hers again. His beady brown eyes blinked. When the gravedigger realized she was alive, he ran off, screaming, tossing the brick aside, his trademark ankle bells ringing in his wake.

She sat up now, spluttering bloody globules of dirt from her mouth and onto her lap. Her hands covered in blood, her fingers started to shake in front of her face.

He swept into view then, right in front of her, the midnight cape she'd come to both fear and adore swirling about his feet. Her savior gave her a small smile and whispered only one word.

"Caprice."

"My teeth," she cried.

Philippe-Auguste ignored her, picking her up effortlessly. She wept in his arms, pain shooting through her body. He was swift to get her away as she bounced in his embrace, aware she was barefoot, her dress bloody and torn. She felt such

acute pain in her legs that it left her feeling delirious...she could smell death. Her eyes adjusted to the light and she knew now though she was near death, it was not her own she could smell. She twisted in his arms, horrified by what she saw.

“Don’t look!” he implored.

But how could she not? He’d lifted her out of a grave beside many other bodies. So many of them buried in a single hole where she’d lain with men, women, children, all victims of the plague. Oh yes, she knew exactly where she was, but she didn’t know how she’d wound up on quarantine island.

She heard voices. Somebody screamed. She continued to choke, her head and arms limp as he ran with her past the sanatorium, voices shouting after them.

My God, what was she doing here? Frantically, her gaze darted about. She heard the warning bells at the feet of several *pizzicamorti*. There were dead bodies everywhere. She cried afresh at the swollen bodies of babies, the bleeding mouths on the sightless faces lying piled up on the ground like wilted, fallen trees.

Everywhere she looked, she saw death. She saw familiar faces. Her beloved teacher, Titian’s body lay on a pallet. What would they do with the greatest artist who ever lived?

Would he, too, be destined for a grave lying

anonymously among the victims of the plague?

She held onto her lover whose assured strides carried them away from the stench of decay.

"I have her!" Philippe-Auguste called out and she felt his only hesitant step. Her feet burned her. Inexplicably, pain erupted from them when a second set of arms tried to help and she knew now they were on a boat.

Philippe-Auguste sat in the bow, holding her in his arms. She felt him move, felt something cold at her lips.

"Drink, my love, but do not swallow."

She did as told, spitting out the cool liquid several times. She was aware of her ragged breathing. He looked down at her, worry and grief etched in his handsome face.

"We are close, my love, be strong."

"Where?" Her voice sounded strange, as if drugged. She felt she was drifting in and out of her body. Everything felt distorted. She resisted his tight embrace and he held her closer still. Her hand fell to the side of the boat and her fingers touched icy waves.

Philippe-Auguste glanced down again, pulling her arm back to safety. His worried gaze moved ahead once more. "How long?" he asked.

"A few minutes," came the response and Caprice drifted toward sleep once more.

"Caprice!"



Her eyes opened, her vision blurry as her gaze connected with Philippe-Auguste.

"If you sleep, you will die. And if you die, I die. Stay awake, my love, we are so close."

She couldn't stay awake. She wanted to die. How had she come here? Where were Marcello and Massimo? She remembered the fight. Marcello. Was he all right? "Marcello," she said aloud, her voice sounding thick to her own ears.

"We will find him."

Philippe-Auguste wouldn't look at her and she wondered if he was dead.

"We're here." His voice grim, his face retained that worried expression. He was a tall slim man, deceptively strong. His long gray hair fell across his face as he picked her up again.

"Philippe-Auguste, where are we?" she mumbled into his shoulder.

"Sant' Erasmo. We are safe."

His French accent never failed to arouse her, or to assure her of his courage. He was unlike any man she had ever met. She could feel his heartbeat against her cheek and she loved him for finding her. She could still smell death. The dirt was still in her eyes and mouth and Philippe-Auguste ran across the damp embankment with her. She could hear his court boots squelching in the mud.

"No...this way," he said to himself.

Her head lolled against his chest and he almost

dropped her. Her head snapped back and she caught a glimpse of her beloved Venice in the distance with its church bell towers hovering below gathering rain clouds. Would she ever go home again?

They arrived at an old building.

"It's a church," he whispered and she almost laughed.

He set her down on her feet and the pain was excruciating. She fell immediately and hit her head on the ground. He quickly gathered her in his arms and threw her over his shoulder.

Upside down, she could see the boat that had brought them to the island, in the far distance, and she wondered what price he'd paid to save her.

Philippe-Auguste unlatched the door at last and took her inside. She sighed with relief to be in the dark, the light coming in patches only. He settled her on a sofa, stiff and uncomfortable. It smelled musty, but she didn't care.

He began to undress her. Even in her compromised state, the mere touch of his skin on hers inflamed her. His eyes ignited and their gazes met. His lips pressed against her throat for an all-too-brief moment.

"My love, your ankles are broken," he said. "I will bind them."

He left her for what seemed like an eternity and when he returned, he held a bucket in his hands.

She tried to raise herself on one elbow to watch what he was doing.

"It's a paste," he said. "I'm going to make a cast. I saw this done in Paris. Eggs, animal fat and flour."

"Where did you find it all?" she asked, amazed once again at his ingenuity. There was nothing Philippe-Auguste couldn't do.

"I raided the farmhouse next door," he told her and she lay there, letting him tend to her. She felt the gentle way he worked on her feet, letting out a sob only once at the searing pain.

Philippe-Auguste raised troubled eyes to her. "You were wearing those damned *chopines*, weren't you?" he demanded. "Twelve inches of hell. I keep telling you they're dangerous. Didn't I say one day you'd get hurt?"

"They're the fashion," she said weakly.

He grunted.

"I jumped," she gasped, remembering now the smoky, burning building.

"You won't be wearing them again for a while," he said. "Stay there."

She couldn't have left the sofa even to crawl. She felt as if every last bone in her body was broken. She remembered the jump. *Oh...the lagoon.* She hit the water with her feet.

*And then what? Why can't I remember?*

Philippe-Auguste was back. He held her head

up with one arm, holding a golden cup to her lips.

"Wine," he whispered and she wondered if it was holy wine and if this indeed was a cardinal sin.

He used strips of her torn dress to bathe her bleeding mouth and nose, to dab dirt from her eyes. At last, Philippe-Auguste smiled at her.

"And now I think it's time you ate."

He bent his head to her and her senses all snapped into focus. She grabbed her lover's head, her canine teeth elongating. She felt her spirit sighing peacefully. She still had her teeth. She found her favorite spot on his neck and attacked him.

From outside, unbelievably, she heard the roar of voices as Philippe-Auguste's heartbeat pounded in her head.

"Vampiro! Vampiro!"

## CHAPTER TWO

Despite the threat, they remained where they were until Philippe-Auguste withdrew his neck from her grasping lips. She lay back against the sofa, panting. *How far we've come.* She relaxed at last. *We have learned to live with the constant threat of fear.*

"Let me check," he whispered, but already the voices splintered, receded in the distance. He peered out of the corner of a lace-covered window. "We should be fine. They won't suspect us here." He grinned at her. "They may come back. We will need to be very quiet."

He returned to her. She gazed up at him and in that moment, she felt his blood, his heartbeat racing through her, body and soul. She moved her hand toward his trousers, to his cock. He was hard.

"Caprice, you are bold."

"Bold, am I?" She laughed then. "Oh, my love, the spirit is strong, but the flesh, I'm afraid will

not cooperate.”

His eyes burnished, his own teeth protruding in his desire for her. Her hands reached up to him. He knelt beside her and her tongue moved to his neck. She licked her bite wounds clean and his hand rubbed her belly. He was the loveliest man in the whole, wide world.

“I want to check on things...see what you got us into.”

She clung to him. “No, don’t leave me.”

“I’m not leaving you, *mon amant*, but the devil, as you know, my love, is in the details.” He put his hand to her head and stood. “Get some rest.”

She allowed herself to lie back, shivering a little, but he soon returned with a thick woolen blanket that smelled of lavender. She found herself drifting...

\* \* \* \*

*Six months earlier*

She entered the salon and laughed when she saw all the pretty women in their lavish gowns and sparkling jewels. She greeted her friend, Geovanna, who accompanied her consort. Geovanna, her haircut very short in the fashion of certain courtesans, also wore a man’s outfit. Her consort, a middle-aged, wealthy wine merchant

named Baldovino, favored anal sex, but paid Geovanna to dress like a man, thereby avoiding the stigma of homosexuality. It was the accepted custom, flaunted more in Venice than other parts of Italy. Geovanna was not conventionally beautiful and did not wear makeup in her role. She wore hose and a leather doublet like aristocratic men. Her clothes spoke of money, slashes in her leather vest revealing brilliant colors of silk underneath, Oh yes, there was no doubt of her role, like all the other courtesans of polite society.

It seemed to Caprice that Geovanna, who at twenty-three was two years younger than Caprice, now looked much, much older. She, also, did not look very happy. "Is everything all right?" she asked her friend.

"We'll talk tomorrow," Geovanna assured her, and Caprice turned her attention to the rest of the crowd. A few of the women wore masks, as was the custom so you couldn't always tell the courtesans from the noblewomen. Caprice's gaze fell on a woman wearing a yellow veil, denoting her courtesan status, giving herself away as a newcomer. Nobody in Venice followed the accepted rules of conduct. Nobody.

Polisena Pecorina, the famed *gentildonna* of Venice, stood in the center of the room in a stunning gown of purple and burgundy lace and

satin, several strands of pearls heaving on her impressive bosom. She sang a lovely song Caprice did not recognize, to the accompaniment of several *violini*. She was as lovely as Massimo had promised.

Caprice, who took her position as a *cortigana onesta*, an honest courtesan with great pride, squeezed past the men and women gazing in rapt attention at the woman who was both a poet and singer.

She tossed back her long, auburn curls and gave her best smile to La Pecorina, whom she hoped to befriend. As a *gentildonna*, the singer was a slight social step above Caprice, but both women had the distinction of never sleeping with men for money.

*No, if they knew my true secret, they would laugh.* Caprice was certain of that. She scanned the packed room for the Visconti twins and felt a ripple of pleasure at the sight of Marcello.

She had expected Massimo, his brother, but few could tell the twenty-eight-year-old Visconti twins apart. She could. Marcello's nose had a slight bend midway, thanks to a brief and ill-advised flirtation with boxing. She was pleased to find Marcello, for he was much easier to cajole into her plans than Massimo.

He caught her gaze and his sensitive, handsome face lit up. His long dark hair gleamed and he



smiled at her, making room for her beside him on a long, red velvet chaise.

An attendant handed Caprice a small glass dish and she accepted it eagerly, taking an appreciative sniff at the contents as her tiny dessert fork speared a black cherry macerated in Tyrian wine.

Marcello watched her out of the corner of his eye and she felt his urge to laugh. Yes, she adored her food. The attendant held a gilded tray toward her and she accepted a glass of malvasia, sipping the fragrant white wine with satisfaction.

Her feet ached in her new wooden *chopines*. She much preferred the cork, but these were so pretty with their ribbons and bows. She tried, surreptitiously, to stretch her arches under her long, heavy brocade gown as she took in the inhabitants of the Salon Ridotto. A gambling room required all those who gambled to wear masks when they played, but here, in the music room, masks were not necessary. Caprice guessed that Massimo was at one of the tables, and as the singer's dainty, rippling song concluded, the audience applauded.

Caprice put her lips to Marcello's ear. "Come model for me." She noticed his hesitation. "Please," she whispered, not wanting to wait through additional musical entertainments.

"Why not?" He shrugged. "I'm not winning today anyway."

He followed her out and Caprice detected the wonderful smell of baking tarts.

"You're incorrigible," Marcello said with a laugh. They paused at a long table on which stood a dizzying array of food.

"Let's go," she said, afraid of losing the light.

They ran down the steps to the heavy wooden front door, laughing and chattering as they spilled onto the small side street of *Cannaregio*, the second largest of Venice's six *sestieri*, or districts.

Marcello held her back and Caprice found her laughter dying on her lips. She followed his gaze and gulped. A heavily caped doctor emerged from a tall, thin house opposite them. He smelled strongly of juniper, the herbs most favored to protect healthcare workers. The plague was fast becoming a disease that was taking everybody, not just the poor.

"Isn't that Giardino, the baker's house?" Marcello asked her as the doctor averted his gaze from them and hurried away to the high end of the cobblestone street.

"I...I think so," she replied, thinking of the baker's beautiful wife and their handsome, sturdy little boys.

Marcello caught Caprice's hand in his and they ran all the way to her home on *Piazza San Marco*. Her feet screamed in retribution, but as they neared the *piazza*, she smiled at the old Carlessi

sisters sewing lace in wooden chairs lined up in the sun. The speed with which they worked suggested they had a new consignment from the palace, which heartened Caprice. She adored the old ladies and their chattering only increased as she and Marcello arrived.

"Ciao, salve, hello, how are you?" They greeted her with warmth, twittering like cute chickens at Marcello who dutifully fingered their efforts and proclaimed them, *bello*, beautiful.

Caprice and Marcello climbed the stairs to her house, a wondrous four-story affair left to her by her parents. The living room of the elegant house overlooked the lagoon on one side and San Giorgio Island on the other. They could still hear the old ladies from this height and their gaiety seemed to inspire Marcello, who caught Caprice in his arms. For one brief, delicious moment, their lips met and then she pushed herself away from him.

She threw herself into a tapestry chair it had taken her mother seven years to complete. Marcello was swift to take first one foot into his hands, then the other, untying her shoes. His fingers worked magic on them and he gazed into her eyes, desperately.

"You know I love you."

"This light is perfect," she said and he shook his head. He began to strip his luxurious clothing. Her

brown eyes never left him for a moment as he took off all his clothes. She ran her hands over the slashed leather doublet that revealed the rich tones of his emerald and crimson-colored *camicia* beneath it. She couldn't wait to touch his naked body. She told herself day after day, her interest in him was purely professional, but now as his warm skin reacted to her touch, she knew it was more than that. She stood behind him, allowing her face to rest in the hollow of his shoulder. He had a different scent than Massimo. She always thought of milk and honey with Marcello...something much stronger emanated from Massimo.

Marcello's hand touched hers, their fingers entwining briefly. She felt him pressing his spectacular bottom into her belly and her hand left his to feel the sinewy muscle of his well-sculpted torso.

She stopped at his pelvis and moved away, but not before she got a good look at his big, meaty cock, the head peeking out, pink and glistening from the foreskin. She swallowed hard. She dreamed of him every night and it was getting worse. She ran across the room, but he stopped her.

"What am I to be paid?"

She smiled. She had fashioned a career for herself as an honest courtesan, few knowing that she sank everything into paying models for her

work. "Your usual fee," she said.

"I would like it now, please, Caprice."

His forthrightness impressed her. Yes, it was much better this way. She barely paused before continuing across the room. It was large and airy, filled with many antiques and beautiful pieces of furniture, none of which she was permitted to sell by the terms of her father's will. In five years, at the age of thirty, she would then dispense of the items as she saw fit.

Caprice didn't want to think about that now. The inherited treasures bore little interest for her. In fact, she had covered most of them in drop cloths and pushed them aside to accommodate her passion, her art. She opened a desk drawer and removed a handful of *zecchino*, the Venetian ducat, and counted. She picked up one more coin and took it to Marcello.

"Thank you."

He placed the coins in a leather pouch in his pocket and with that formality over took his assumed position, lying on the sofa on which Caprice's mother had once forbade even well-healed, properly attired guests to recline.

Marcello picked up a lute, and placed it strategically across his bare crotch as he laid on the blood-red fabric that draped the sofa.

Caprice put a smock over her dress, threw the covering off her latest masterpiece and picked up

her paintbrush, content with the shadows falling across her subject. She depicted him as near to life as she could, but in her work, the men became women. She hated to paint women, only beautiful men and this was her secret. She'd managed to get a few of Venice's finest to pose for her. To her it seemed an innocent revenge since none was required to sleep with her, but for all the female friends she had seen suffer and left pregnant by their consorts, this was a pleasant retribution.

Now, she chewed on the end of her paintbrush and imagined she was the great painter, Titian. Recently, she and Geovanna had sneaked into Titian's great studio, *La Sanseria*, to watch the great master paint. Nobody matched Titian's eye for color and this was where Caprice felt she could excel in her own right. She had met another man, Edouard, a French artist who had taught her the new way of gouache.

She studied his efforts and felt it had been worth every *zecchino* she'd paid Edouard to master this method. He, in turn, secured Caprice her first professional commission for his sister.

Caprice had started with a tempera base, applied an oil paint over this, which gave a wonderful depth and richness to her work. She hummed as she worked on the fine detail of the curved arm of the sofa and felt happier than she had in weeks.

"I love you," Marcello said again, and she ignored him.

He knew better than to speak, but in truth, she enjoyed hearing him say these words. She was worried that she, too, loved him, but that would need to be dealt with later.

The dark tones she had applied to her rendition of the sofa had lightened as they dried, just as her teacher had promised. She sat back and admired her efforts. She felt she was almost channeling Titian when she laid down her brush and, just as he did, used her fingertips to complete the final touches to her work.

Her house was drifting into darkness when she looked up and found Marcello's gaze on her face.

"It's finished, isn't it?" he asked.

She couldn't speak. She just sat back and felt the tension streaking up her spine to her neck.

"May I look?"

Caprice waited.

Marcello lay down the lute and moved toward her. "That's me?" he laughed.

Caprice shrugged.

"I have breasts like this?" He leaned in closer to study the work. "It's beautiful, Caprice." His hand moved to her neck as if he, instinctively, knew she needed relief. "However, it's not finished until you sign it."

Caprice laughed, a genuine, joyous sound that

also made Marcello laugh.

He handed her a grimy cloth dangling from a chair and she wiped the paints from her fingers.

She picked up her brush again and paused. Now or never. This was the moment she'd been waiting for and she took a deep breath before signing, *Capriccio*.

Marcello gaped. "Capriccio?"

"My teacher tells me I can make more money if they think I am a man."

"How will you get away with that?"

"By sending my lover there with the finished work."

"Your lover?" Marcello gazed down at her now, his eyes alive in the increasing darkness.

She gazed up at him and he took her hand.

They'd waited weeks for this moment.

In the quiet sumptuousness of her boudoir, Caprice was aware of the slapping of boats out on the lagoon, light coming from the just-lit streetlamps and the intensity of Marcello's breathing.

"I should wash my hands," she murmured, but he shook his head.

"No, I want to make love to the artist and the woman." His hands tore the smock from her body, his face moving to her throat and chest.

"Do you know how often I have studied this neckline and wanted nothing more than to lick



it?" he asked her.

She sighed at the sensation of his lips on her breasts, which seemed to swell at his slightest touch.

"Look at that," he breathed. "They like me."

He picked her up and carried her to the bed.

Caprice allowed him to remove her stockings, which he rolled down her feet. She had imagined this moment so many times, but had not expected the astonishing heat between them. She had fancied Marcello to be a quiet, passive lover, not the raging tiger who moved up and kissed her with such authority and grace. She found her legs opening up to him and, in spite of the layers of clothing she still wore, felt his fingers burning into her.

Marcello struggled to undress her, removing her many petticoats. As she finally lay in a chemise and pantaloons, she cried out when he lay on top of her, his rigid cock between them. She had never begged a man to fuck her before, never needed a man inside her so badly. She had never been ready without much preparation, and now, he drew down her pantaloons, his tongue driving her wild.

He tore them to shreds in his haste to taste her. She didn't care. She shrieked when his tongue touched her inner folds and wept when it actually moved inside her sopping pussy.

"Oh God, fuck me," she cried out, but Marcello was now in charge. Oh, he was punishing her, for sure. He took off her camisole, leaving her jewels on her neck.

"I love you, my lady," he said, rewarding her with his hard, driving cock, at last.

Caprice held his ass in her hands as he plunged into her repeatedly. They rocked together, pushing and pulling at one another, then she felt the explosion in her head.

Marcello came with a cry, his hands holding her head to him when the door to her room flew open.

"What's this?"

Marcello, still imbedded inside Caprice, twisted around to look.

"*Buono sera*, good evening, Massimo," Caprice said, unable to keep the smug satisfaction from her voice.

"It's not a good evening." Massimo swept into the room in fury.

Marcello raised himself up on one arm, attempting to remove himself from Caprice, whose legs wrapped around him, keeping him in place.

"I know, I told you I would wait, but he's so beautiful, I couldn't help myself." She grinned.

Marcello gaped at her. "You are my brother's lover?"

"You didn't know?"

"We are to share you?"

"Why not?" she asked, gazing into his handsome face. "I love you."

"Now, she tells me." Marcello tried to move away from her, but she still held him with her legs.

"Marcello, I can give you everything you want. Both of you." As if to prove her point, she reached toward Massimo, who was already stripping his doublet and camicia from his body. "Hurry," she breathed as she felt Marcello hardening inside her again. "Hurry, please."

Massimo removed everything as Marcello pulled out of Caprice, who held his face in her hands. They moved over on the bed, allowing room for Massimo. Marcello, a jealous look on his face, watched as Massimo captured one of Caprice's nipples in his mouth. Without saying a word, Massimo nudged him toward her other breast and Caprice cried out when she felt two mouths working on her. There was a brief moment of anger when both men found their fingers moving down to her pussy, but Marcello allowed his brother to stroke her and resumed sucking and licking the pert breast in his fingers.

Caprice couldn't believe two men were making love to her, although this had long been her wish, to share the twins, keeping them for her own. She was in shock when Massimo's face moved past

her pussy and to her ass. Nobody had ever touched her there before.

*"Molto bene, very good,"* Marcello whispered and his mouth moved to her waiting pussy, making contact with her quivering clit.

She came so hard and so fast it shocked them all. She had never in her life had a man lick her to an orgasm and the combination of two tongues on her sent her over the edge.

"I think Caprice needs two men to fuck her," Marcello said. "One is not enough."

"You are right." Massimo pushed his brother out of the way. "Right now, our little whore is mine."

He took her with his customary impatience and Caprice raised her face to Marcello, holding his cock in her hand as Massimo fucked her. Marcello kissed her and the next thing she knew, Massimo rolled underneath her so that she was riding him and Marcello's face moved to her breasts again. She loved fucking one man, kissing another.

For hours, the three new lovers played. At one point, they collapsed on the bed.

"I'm hungry," Caprice said.

"No, not anymore, I can't," Massimo moaned.

"Not for sex. I'm hungry for food."

"I'm still hungry for you, Caprice," Marcello whispered, and as Massimo slumbered, his face moved between her hungry, open thighs.

Caprice believed she had just died and gone to heaven.

## CHAPTER THREE

Making love with Marcello felt like being in a strong, warm ocean current that swept her away and yet, she *wanted* to be swept away. By contrast, Massimo, the more dominant of the Visconti twins, made love to her as if he was proving a point, over and over again. In the small hours of the morning, Caprice found herself awakening to lips on her breasts, dueling tongues at her throat... She shook the thought from her head and tried to focus on what the Countess D'Agostino was saying.

They stood now, in front of Capriccio's portrait as Caprice watched the recently married Frenchwoman's attempts to describe what she saw in the piece to Marcello. It was not that she was stupid. Far from it. She was entirely beautiful and charming and understood the final work to be *exquisite*, but fumbled when trying to explain the feelings it evoked.

"I feel as though I know her, that we yearn for

the same things." She glanced at Caprice. "Do you think me foolish?"

"Not at all." Caprice reached a languid hand toward the three-tiered silver serving dish and selected another piece of portingale. She could not believe the sweetness of the fruit and wondered if her new state of affairs contributed to her feeling of well-being.

Though Massimo was the more assertive twin, Caprice knew Marcello was the perfect representative for the artist in handling the client. With a gentle determination that was so winning, Marcello threw out a high price, which she paid, and ordered a second piece.

"I want a companion piece, sunrise, bright yellows..." Countess D'Agostino paused. "Ah, and tell your artist friend I want the same model." She handed several more coins to Marcello who glanced at Caprice with a slight incline of his head.

Caprice, who had been thoroughly enjoying the tempting fruits put before her, was reluctant to leave. All she had at home were a few withered figs.

"Do you think Capriccio will do this for me?" the Countess asked Marcello.

"I am certain he can be persuaded," Marcello replied.

"And this model, can she be...persuaded to

pose again?"

"I believe so." Marcello grinned at Caprice when the Countess leaned over to study her new acquisition once more.

"You must bring Capriccio here to meet me," the Countess declared. "My brother Edouard told me he was talented, but he is so much more. Tell me, is your cousin terribly handsome?"

Caprice, who posed as Capriccio's cousin, scooped a few raspberries into her fingers, another new delicacy she had fallen in love with, and sighed. "My cousin is such a recluse. All he does is paint and sleep."

"Really? How...quaint!" the Countess's cheeks blossomed pink.

Caprice felt her own cheeks flame. The Countess was falling in love with the artist! "He will be so happy to know you understand and appreciate his work." Caprice stood finally and extended her hand to the Countess.

"Please, please talk to him. Just a little tea. I want to meet him."

Under the circumstances, she felt it was impossible to rebuff her again so Caprice demurred. "I will see what I can do."

"You didn't!" Geovanna, sitting beside her, sipped a cup of coffee, a new beverage available, only recently, thanks to Geovanna's consort,



Baldovino, who brought the beans home from a voyage to Yemen. "You told her you'd try?"

"With the money she's paying me...him...us...I couldn't say no."

"Food must have been involved," Geovanna said. "If you would just learn to cook, you would not be seduced so easily into making such rash promises."

Caprice would have been offended if this statement wasn't true. With as much dignity as she could muster, she picked up the coffee cup on her paint palette and scrutinized it. Six *Raffaellesco Deruta* cups arrived, by messenger, hours after Caprice and Marcello had returned home. Geovanna had arrived, bringing her gift of the coffee and now, Caprice realized, the delicate porcelain cups with finely detailed dragons and ships were miniature works of art. She raised the cup to look at the base. *Raphael*. She sipped the warm, slightly bitter liquid and smiled at Marcello. "You are in perfect position," she said and he grunted.

"I recall you saying this over an hour ago."

She laughed and a knock on the door downstairs interrupted them. Caprice moved to the windows overlooking the square. "Oh no," she groaned. "Geovanna. Quick. You must strip. She must never know Marcello is my model. Marcello, you must dress." She threw his clothes at him and

he scurried to the bedroom.

Caprice took her time going downstairs and opened her door to find the Countess wobbling on thirty-inch high *chopines* made of red velvet on wooden platforms. They were the most beautiful shoes Caprice had ever seen. A manservant who helped her up the stairs, stood outside the door to the living room as the Countess raced toward the model reclining on the sofa.

"Oh!" her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, but she looks nothing like..." She looked at the canvas mounted on the easel and her gaze flicked back and forth between the model and the portrait. "He is a genius," she said at last. "He makes her look very beautiful."

Geovanna's face darkened, her expression turned murderous.

The Countess gasped. "Oh! He is here!"

"He...ah...er...he is very shy," Caprice said, keeping her voice low in spite of her sudden panic. She did not want her career over before it had even begun. She sent out a fervent prayer to the angels and goddesses of artists everywhere for Massimo not to blunder in and make a mess of it all.

"Oh, he likes my coffee cups." The Countess's eyes shone with happiness.

"Very much," Caprice assured.

"I want to meet him."

"Countess D'Agostino, I do understand, but it's not possible when he is working. He—"

"Then he must come to a ball at my house. I insist upon it. He can be my guest of honor."

Caprice thought quickly. Balls were masked affairs. She could dress as a man, wear a mask, whirl in and out and pick up some new business whilst remaining utterly anonymous. "Well," she said, curious to know how badly the Countess wanted Capriccio in attendance. "That would be pleasant, no doubt, however, my cousin, being quite poor...doesn't really have the necessary garments for a ball."

"Really? How interesting. How...odd."

"Being poor, he doesn't have colorful...attire."

The Countess understood then and a look of determination fired her large gray-blue eyes. "Then I shall send him garments." The countess left the house on very unsteady feet. Caprice and Geovanna waited until she hobbled to the end of the street before laughing.

"A masked ball!" Geovanna clutched her sides after the initial burst of merriment had subsided. "Please tell me I can come!"

Caprice had never been so excited in her life. She entered the D'Agostino residence to the accompaniment of lutes and fireworks, Geovanna on one side, Marcello on the other, a sulky-looking

Massimo behind them.

All wore masks and Massimo felt slighted that his beautiful mistress should dress like a man.

"You are the most beautiful woman in Venice and you're wearing...hose!" He shuddered. He seemed to have difficulty sipping his wine through the mouth of his harlequin mask, but Caprice was in her element. The fun of these balls was the mystery of who was behind the mask. For days, she had exchanged coy notes with the Countess and knew the lady enjoyed a special thrill, knowing she'd picked out the costume of her newly discovered artist.

Caprice knew she looked good. It had been an effort to flatten her breasts beneath the jewel-encrusted doublet, her long curly hair hidden under a gathered hat with a jeweled band that matched the doublet. People swirled around them and Caprice's gaze fixed on the enormous tables of food.

"Out of my way, woman," she muttered to Geovanna, who was also dressed as a man. Baldovino, her consort, was in a disagreeable mood, owing to a bad bout of gout, and she kept her eye on him. Caprice once again marveled at how fantastically fat and ugly the man was, and yet, how devoted Geovanna was to him.

A group of musicians with horns and pipes heralded the arrival of the first course. Caprice

didn't know where to start. There were chickens, baked fish, squid, pork, beef, tortes and pies...but she was a sweets lover and, after loading a plate with chicken and fish, turned her attention to the desserts. She knew she would be back at this table for the rest of the night. She helped herself to fried pastry dressed with rose water and honey, blanchmange and fruit soaked in wine. She looked up and almost dropped her plate.

Caprice felt the dizziness consume her as the man watching her from across the room gave her a lopsided smile. She held his gaze through her mask, feeling beads of sweat trickle down behind her knees. What was happening to her? He wore long gray hair that separated him from the others. She couldn't hazard his age, guessing him to be in his thirties. He wasn't wearing a mask and he was the most beautiful and the most dangerous man she'd ever seen.

Suddenly feeling weak and dizzy, four servants hoisting a huge tray containing a whole suckling pig to the center of the table distracted her. With shaky fingers, she reached for the syrup covering the pastry only to find to her shock, the gray-haired stranger suddenly beside her. He held a hand mask to his face with one hand, two fingers from the other dipping into the sugary concoction and traveling to her parted lips. She sucked on them eagerly and felt a flicker of fire soar through

her as their eyes met and held.

He removed his fingers from her mouth and she felt oddly deflated and empty.

"My name is Jean Philippe-Auguste, but I prefer to be known as Philippe-Auguste," he said. "And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

*Speaking? How can I speak? I'll give myself away as a woman. But with this man, I want to be a woman.* She quickly picked up her pastry, took a bite and found it would not fit through the mouth of her mask. It lodged there and Philippe-Auguste laughed.

"Quite a character, aren't you? I was told you were a very great painter, but nobody mentioned your comic skills."

She was aware of people's gazes. The pastry was really stuck. It hung like a flag in the breeze. Philippe-Auguste loaded up his own plate and she turned and fled...*why, oh why, did this have to happen to me?*

She ran down several corridors to a private room where she removed the mask, dislodged the pastry and shrugging, consumed it. She could hear the sound of lovemaking from another room and recognized Geovanna's voice.

"Oh, yes, papa, fuck me! I've been such a bad boy!"

She stifled a laugh, adjusted her mask and

slipped out of the room. Music and lights drew her toward the action, but a hand from a doorway drew her away from it. Philippe-Auguste. Her legs trembled when he placed his lips on hers and, for a fleeting moment, she gave into the magnificent Frenchman.

She put her hands on his chest and pushed him away. This was ridiculous. He thought she was a man...soon enough he would find out she wasn't and it would destroy her ruse. She'd stayed far too long at the ball and her patroness would no doubt be unhappy, but she had to leave. She ran from Philippe-Auguste, but he called her, shocking her when his fervent whisper kissed her ear.

"Caprice."

She turned on her heel, found herself in his tight embrace.

He lifted the mask from her face.

"How did you know?" she asked as he claimed her mouth with his. Despite having two ardent and talented lovers, this stranger stoked a new and frightening blaze in her. He held her to him and she touched his face.

She heard a sound and turned as Philippe-Auguste was kissing her throat. "Marcello!" Her choked gasp deemed her guilty, but Marcello looked at Philippe-Auguste, who extended an arm to him.

"There you are, *mon amant*...I have met your

little friend at last. And you are right, she is as sweet and succulent as you promised."



## CHAPTER FOUR

Marcello took Philippe-Auguste's hand. Instantly, his body responded to the mysterious male's warm touch as it had so often during the brief time they had become acquainted. Never before had another man's presence elicited such a response within him, but there was no denying his want. His hands fairly shook from it. It was almost as strong as his need for Caprice.

Almost.

Shifting his gaze off the Frenchman, Marcello looked over at Caprice, her pink lips parted in surprise as her breath came out in rapid bursts. Was she aroused? Angry? Both? He wasn't sure. He did know one thing though. She looked so alluring right now, even dressed up as a man. Staring at her legs in those damned tights, he couldn't help but remember how sweet the flesh had tasted under his tongue. How nice it felt when her heels dug into his back as she urged him on. How when Massimo had buried his dark head

between her milky white thighs, Marcello had almost spilled his seed just from looking at them.

"Marcello?" Caprice breathed, her voice bringing him abruptly out of his sex-infused thoughts. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I thought, perhaps, I could interest you in something French?" As soon as the words spilled out, Marcello closed his eyes and silently cursed himself for the fool he was. When Caprice let out an outraged gasp and slapped him across the face, he didn't even bother trying to avoid it, knowing he fully deserved the blow.

"You pompous fool," she spat, her eyes, which, moments ago were full of passion, now glittered with anger.

"I meant no offense," Marcello hurried, trying to right the awful mess he'd made. "I just thought that after as enjoyable our last encounter was that you would like to meet Philippe-Auguste." Marcello watched the varied expressions pass over Caprice's delicate face—anger, surprise, curiosity, embarrassment, before anger took over again and stayed.

"I am not a whore." She bared her teeth as she spun on heel to leave.

"Please, do not leave, yet," Philippe-Auguste implored as he touched her arm to stay her. "You will have to forgive my friend. He is young and eager."

"He's an idiot," she countered, but stayed.

Philippe traced her soft jaw line with the tip of his finger and Marcello could see her tremble in response.

"I love you," Marcello told her as he ran his tongue over his lips. Seeing her react so vividly to the Frenchman's touch was so alluring. His heart pounded in his chest, a sweat broke out over his body as his cock grew hard.

"I still don't understand." Caprice closed her eyes as Philippe-Auguste continued to stroke her face.

Truthfully, Marcello didn't fully understand either. All he knew was that as soon as he saw the mysterious Frenchman a few days ago across the parlor, he'd been strangely drawn to him. It had become imperative he introduce him to Caprice as well. Even before the night of passion he'd shared with her and Massimo, Marcello knew he wanted to enjoy the pleasure of her and Philippe-Auguste together.

"Don't understand," Philippe-Auguste urged as he feathered a kiss on her cheek. "Just feel, *mon petite*."

Caprice's slender body swayed into the large male, her tiny fists grabbing handfuls of his expensive looking doublet. With a sigh, she parted her lips right before he captured her mouth in a searing kiss.

A moan filled the air and Marcello was only partly surprised to realize he was the one making the noise. The vision of his Caprice embracing the handsome male made him ache with need. Hell, whom was he jesting? Marcello was so hard right now he could break stone with his cock.

“Join us.” Philippe-Auguste pulled back from Caprice and, once more, raised his hand.

Marcello wasted no time with doubt as he took it and allowed himself drawn into the pair’s embrace. Desire shot through his body as the familiar sweet scent of Caprice intermingled with the smell of dark spices. Inhaling deeply, Marcello let it wash over him. It was intoxicating, alluring – the aroma of Philippe-Auguste. The Frenchman wrapped one arm around Caprice and the other around Marcello.

Marcello went with it, even though something was warning him this whole situation was dangerous. Something about the other male was making him wary. He knew he should take Caprice and run the other way. However, he couldn’t bring himself to leave the presence of this mysterious man. If anything, fool that he was, he found himself leaning closer in so he could soak up the heat emanating from Philippe-Auguste.

“Have you had many lovers?” Philippe-Auguste asked.

At first, Marcello thought he was talking to

Caprice until he felt the man's fingers stroke his throat. Marcello trembled at the other male's touch, much like Caprice earlier. "Yes, I've had a few," he whispered, very aware of how Caprice's gaze was dark with desire as she took in the scene.

"Any males?" Philippe-Auguste leaned in so close his hot breath fanned Marcello's cheek.

"No, it is forbidden." Even as he made this protest, he had to resist the urge to turn his face so he could kiss the Frenchman.

"Oh, Marcello, I thought you were into the forbidden. After all, it's not every day that brothers share the same woman."

Marcello gasped, surprised that Philippe-Auguste knew. He exchanged surprised expressions with Caprice and she gave a slight shake of her head to tell him that she'd not told him either.

"How did you—" His question was cut off when Philippe-Auguste captured his mouth in a passionate kiss.

Shocked at first, Marcello's body stiffened. He knew he should push the other man away, take Caprice and run in the other direction. Yet, his body could not obey those commands. Where Caprice's lips were always so soft and sweet, Philippe-Auguste's were hard and unyielding. Caprice's body always seemed to melt against him, the curves fitting into him perfectly. With

Philippe-Auguste, it felt as if he were at risk of being overwhelmed by the other male's larger build. An exciting thrill went through his body as the hint of danger made him even more aroused. There was no way he could deny this. He would sooner stop breathing.

Yielding, he parted his lips so Philippe-Auguste could slip his tongue into his mouth. Marcello let go of all his inhibitions and allowed passion take over. The Frenchman cupped the back of his head and drew him in even closer. Grabbing two handfuls of Philippe-Auguste's doublet for support, Marcello returned his kiss earnestly. A moan floated through the air, like his had been earlier. This one had a feminine undertone that told him it was from Caprice.

Oh God, this was turning her on. Marcello hadn't thought it was possible to get more aroused, but he was. If Philippe-Auguste asked, he would probably gladly strip and fuck both Caprice and him, right now, where anyone could stumble upon them.

"I never thought the sight of two men embracing could be so attractive," Caprice whispered in a sultry voice. She reached over to stroke both males' faces, her long fingers leaving a heated path on their cheeks.

Philippe-Auguste pulled back and Marcello gazed up into his soft brown eyes. Too stunned to

speaking, he just stared like an idiot. The Frenchman gave him an amused smile as he rubbed his thumb over Marcello's bottom lip.

"You are almost as eager as our little temptress." Philippe-Auguste flicked a glance over at Caprice. Her eyes were dark with passion as she ran her tongue along her mouth, almost like she was begging for her own kiss.

Marcello was only too happy to oblige. With a growl, he turned and pinned Caprice to the wall.

"Oh, yes. Please," she cried right before he slammed his lips onto her mouth.

He thanked all that was holy for those ridiculous hose as he took one of her legs and wrapped it around his waist. He longed to feel her full breasts pressing against him, but the tight banding she'd wrapped around herself as part of her disguise prevented that.

She buried both hands in his hair and tugged, eliciting a hiss of pain from him that turned into a groan of pleasure as she started to return his kiss in earnest. Little whimpers came from her as he dipped in to taste her sweet mouth.

"Seeing you two together like this," Philippe-Auguste said in a pleased voice, "it lets me know I was right in my decision."

*Decision? What decision?* Marcello continued to kiss Caprice. Lifting her leg high on his hip, he rocked her forward against the hard length of his

cock.

"You are both so beautiful," Philippe-Auguste crooned as he came up behind Marcello, the heat of his body warming his back. "So innocent, yet carnal. Yes, you will be perfect."

Marcello jumped when he felt lips caressing his throat. The heady, spicy scent of Philippe-Auguste filled his senses. Pressed between the Frenchman's hard body and Caprice's soft form, Marcello's cock twitched in anticipation. He groaned against her mouth when Philippe-Auguste lightly ran his tongue up the length of his throat

"This is madness," Marcello declared even as he went in for another kiss. Philippe-Auguste was now alternating between kissing and sucking his throat, his long, gray hair tickling Marcello's face.

"Pure madness," Caprice agreed as she rocked her hips against him again.

"What is the meaning of this?" Massimo came storming up. He had taken off his mask and the anger on his face was obvious.

Caprice and Marcello jumped, the action screaming of guilt. Philippe-Auguste stayed in place although he did give an amused chuckle.

"I am not finished with you yet," he whispered into Marcello's ear. "I have just now got a taste of you and I fear I shall never be able to give you up." He turned with a flourish, his black cape billowing around him and his gray hair, glinting



like silver in the low light. Turning, he gave a bow to Massimo. "Perhaps, we shall talk next time.

A heavy silence followed his departure. Caprice was gripping his arms so tight, there will likely to be marks tomorrow, her cheeks flush, lips swollen from kissing. After a few tense seconds, she gently pushed him on the chest and he stepped back and faced his brother's wrath.

"Marcello, have you lost your mind?" Massimo asked heatedly. His eyes were bright with anger, his face red.

Marcello balled his hands at his side, getting himself ready for the impending attack. Whenever his twin got angry, violence was sure to follow. It was a lesson Massimo had learned well, courtesy of their father. Marcello, meanwhile, took after their mother and was more apt to use soothing words to bring about harmony.

The peacemaker as opposed to the warrior, they were two sides of the same coin. Twins by birth, and yet, they were so different. Yet, neither one of them was ever good enough in their father's eyes

"Have you lost the ability to hear?" Massimo took a step forward. "I asked you a question."

"No," Marcello rasped, his thoughts still too confused from the encounter with Philippe-Auguste to think of anything more eloquent to say.

"No, what?" Massimo's dark gaze shifted from

Marcello to Caprice before settling back on Marcello.

"No, I have not lost my mind." He raised a brow. "Or my ability to hear for that matter."

Despite the severity of the situation, he could not resist an opportunity to jest. It was something he did whenever he got upset, nervous or angry.

Caprice stifled a giggle, her lips twitching with effort to keep her merriment in check.

Massimo glared at them and Marcello worked to put a serious face on as Caprice put her fingers over her mouth to hide her smile. "You may laugh now, but what if it had been somebody else who found you?"

This time there was a protective side to Massimo's angry tone and that sobered Marcello.

"But it was only you who did find us," Caprice soothed. "So you worry for naught."

"What type of perverted game were you playing?" Massimo reached out and touched Marcello's neck. When he brought them back, they were wet, with blood.

Marcello frowned, bringing his hand up to his throat, only to find a wet stickiness that told him he truly was bleeding. "I do not know how that happened." Confused he continued to stare at the damning evidence of his indiscretion. Why was he bleeding? Thinking back, there had been a brief moment of pain when Philippe-Auguste was

kissing him, but nothing that would justify blood.

"Are you hurt?" Caprice's brow wrinkled in concern.

"It is a mere scratch," he assured her.

"Just a scratch this time, but what could happen if you continue to trust everyone you meet, Marcello?" Massimo snapped.

Marcello knew most of the anger in his brother's voice was because he was concerned. This was not the first time Marcello had trusted somebody while knowing very little about who they truly were.

"Massimo," Caprice chided. "You sound like an old woman. You are making this whole matter more serious than it really is."

"Forgive me," Massimo sneered. "I happen to think it a very serious matter when I catch you in the company of any other man, save for Marcello. Who was he?"

"His name is Philippe-Auguste," Marcello explained. "I met him a few nights ago during a card game."

Both Caprice and Massimo looked at him expectantly, waiting to hear what had made him trust the mysterious male enough to introduce him to the female in their relationship. Marcello struggled to find the reason only to come up with a confused blank himself. What had drawn him to the French nobleman?

"Why bring him here tonight?" Caprice tilted her head to the side as one plump curl freed itself from the band holding her hair back.

"I was intrigued by him." That argument sounded weak, even to his own ears, yet it was all he could offer.

"You were intrigued?" Massimo echoed. "So you decided to expose Caprice to some strange male, just because he made you curious?"

Marcello closed his eyes as shame and regret washed over him. Massimo was correct. He should have never exposed Caprice to such danger. When would he ever learn not to let his emotions rule his actions? As usual, he failed in his duties. "You are right to be angry with me. I should protect our woman, better."

Caprice's mouth dropped open as she glared at both of them, her cheeks now pink with rage. "You are two of the most arrogant males I have ever known. What makes you think you can say who I associate with?" She stomped her foot in frustration. Something she would never have dared do in those wretched *chopines* she favored.

"You are so beautiful when you are angry." Massimo smiled at her.

Marcello groaned because even he knew that now was not the time for comments like that. He decided to ignore his brother's statement and try to diffuse the situation his way. "I'm sorry for all

the trouble I caused everyone tonight. This was to be your special evening, Caprice, and I feared I ruined it for you."

"Yes, you did," Massimo answered before she could.

"Just take me home." Caprice gave Marcello a stern look, her usual kind brown eyes snapping with fury.

"Sure, let me take you to give your regards to the hostess and we shall be on our way." He started to offer her his arm and then brought it back, remembering that she would once again have to put in the guise of a male once they entered the ball.

"I have already given your regrets," Massimo supplied crisply.

"What gave you the right?" Caprice's voice shook as she tilted her chin up defiantly.

"I did, as soon as I saw that Frenchman follow you out. I don't like him or trust him." He shot a disapproving look over at Marcello.

"You don't even know him," Caprice sputtered. "Who are you to make such assumptions?"

"I know enough to decide you shall never see him again." He cast a withering glare at Marcello. "Either one of you."

Marcello opened his mouth to argue, however, Massimo stopped him by simply giving a curt gesture with his hand. As always, Marcello

immediately obeyed and did not dispute him. Ever since they were mere children, he'd always done what his twin had ordered. Massimo may have only been minutes older, but sometimes it may as well have been years.

"You don't own me, Massimo," Caprice said angrily. "What's more you are not in the position to tell me what I can or cannot do." She turned on Marcello and directed her fury on him next. "And I am not some toy for you to show off to your new friends."

Marcello almost argued that she seemed very pleased to have met Philippe-Auguste moments ago when she had been in his embrace, but he kept his mouth closed. It seemed like the wisest move. Even if she was beautiful when she was angry, she was also a force to reckon with and Marcello had no wish to test her patience any further.

She gave them both one last furious glare before she stomped away. She didn't even bother to turn around.

"Where do you think you are going?" Massimo demanded arrogantly.

"I am leaving this place. Without either one of you."

The twins watched her leave, both of them silent. Massimo turned, his face red with rage, his eyes dark and narrowed.

Marcello sighed, knowing that when his brother got like this, there would be no peace in their house for quite a while. The familiar feelings of inadequacy, failure and sadness came over him as he dropped his gaze.

"I am not always going to be there to protect you, brother," Massimo said, his voice still brittle with fury.

"I know," Marcello answered softly, still refusing to look up. "I'm sorry. It will not happen again." There was a heavy sigh, followed by footsteps as Massimo came up and gave him a gentle shove of the shoulder.

"Don't be angry at me," Massimo pleaded, the irritation all gone from him. "I seek only to protect you."

"I'm not a child. I can protect myself." While he knew Massimo had his best interests at heart, it still pricked him that his brother treated him as if he were helpless.

"I believe you can. Yet, I can't help myself. You are all I have in this world and it would destroy me if anything were to happen to you."

Marcello finally raised his eyes and was stunned to see the raw emotion on his brother's usual stoic face. Massimo always hid things deep inside. To see him displaying his weaknesses like this was shocking and it took away all of his resentment. "I promise to use more discretion in

the future." He gave his brother a smile and was relieved when the gesture was returned. For all their differences, he hated it whenever Massimo was angry with him.

"Promise me you will stay away from Philippe-Auguste," Massimo ordered. "There is something about that man that worries me. I sense he could be a danger to all three of us. While he may attract you and Caprice, I don't trust him."

"Massimo, you are sounding like an old woman again."

"Promise me." He grabbed Marcello's arm and gave him a firm shake.

"I promise," he agreed reluctantly, wondering if he could really keep his word.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Marcello sat in a chair next to his bedroom looking out to the dark city. Usually the gentle slapping of the waves against the canals gave him a sense of calm, but tonight nothing could ease his troubled thoughts.

It had been one whole day since the ball and Caprice was still refusing to talk to either him or Massimo. Marcello had spent most of that time blaming himself for inviting Philippe-Auguste into their midst. Massimo had spent most of the time lecturing him.

Marcello let out a long sigh and adjusted himself into a more comfortable position. The chair was like the rest of the house, threadbare and old. The second and third sons of an impoverished noble man, they were upper class in name only. They didn't even have the funds for servants, save for a lone elderly woman who cooked and cleaned for them.

Not that their father would have wasted the

funds on them, even if he did have them for he had long made his disappointment in his youngest sons well-known. He had finally ordered them to the family home in Venice a year ago. Marcello snorted softly in disgust. Father probably was hoping that his twin sons would succumb to the plague where he would finally rid himself of them.

Since they had arrived in Venice, he and Massimo had been struggling to survive. Even though their noble bloodline gave them a certain social status, it hadn't paid their expenses and so, they had to make money where they could. A smile played on his lips. His desperation for coin had led him to Caprice. If he hadn't agreed to model for her, he never would have met and fallen in love with her.

She had loved him, too, until he had made a mess of things. Would she ever forgive him? Probably. Caprice was one of the most caring and gentle people he knew. Nevertheless, it was unlikely she would forget and she sure was not going to trust him again soon. He had fully intended to formally introduce her to Philippe-Auguste at the ball, however, before he had a chance, he had found her in the arms of the Frenchman.

Philippe-Auguste was another problem as well. When Marcello's thoughts weren't on Caprice,

they centered on the mysterious male. There was something dangerous and erotic about the man and Marcello could not help but be drawn to him. Despite his promise to Massimo, Marcello hoped his paths crossed soon with the Frenchman.

A loan figure stepped out of the shadows and stopped just under his window. Marcello smiled when he realized who it was. Philippe-Auguste! Stunned by the male's sudden appearance, Marcello could only stare for several seconds. It wasn't until his seducer gave him a small salute that Marcello jumped to attention. He waved back before he leaped from the chair, grabbed a lit candle and ran down the stairs, stopping only long enough to don a dressing gown to hide his nudity.

Tying the sash around his waist, he grabbed the doorknob, glad that Massimo and the old servant woman were out tonight. His hand shook as he opened the door and found Philippe-Auguste standing there. A hint of a smile grazed the man's mouth and his glorious hair was free and flowed over his shoulders. Dressed in all black, including the cape that he threw over his shoulders, he gave off a dark aura that both thrilled and terrified Marcello.

"Invite me in," Philippe-Auguste demanded, making no move to cross the threshold.

Marcello jumped, realizing he had been staring

like some idiot and had forgotten all his manners. "Sorry," he stammered before standing back and making a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Please, come inside."

A triumphant glimmer came over the male's eyes so briefly that Marcello thought he may have imagined it. Philippe-Auguste stepped inside the house with a grace that would have been feminine with any other male.

Even standing in the middle of Marcello's parlor, the other male seemed to dominate and take charge. Marcello suddenly became aware that he was very nude under the robe and he didn't even have shoes on. He, also, realized that he was very alone with the Frenchman. Part of him was thrilled at the prospect of finally having Philippe-Auguste all to himself. Another part was wary because the man did have a dangerous aura about him that seemed to be screaming at Marcello to run in the opposite direction. "Would you like some wine?" Marcello asked politely.

"I would love some." Philippe-Auguste gave him a tight-lipped smile. "The night has been very eventful and I am very thirsty."

As Marcello led him through the house, he was painfully aware of how worn and threadbare all the furnishings were. Once, his family had boasted great wealth, but the fortune had slowly dwindled in the past generations until there was little left,

but the title. Reaching the dim parlor, Marcello lit a lamp before pouring a glass of wine and handing it to the Frenchman.

"Thank you," Philippe-Auguste said as he took it.

Their fingers brushed slightly and sparks of desire shot up Marcello's arm.

"Why did you come here tonight?" Marcello nervously cleared his throat as he stepped back, one hand grabbing the knot of his sash in a protective gesture.

"Maybe I wanted to check on your well-being?" He sipped the wine, his strong throat working smoothing as he swallowed.

Marcello was quick to defend his twin. "Massimo may have been angry, but he would never harm me."

"He seemed pretty furious. I don't think I made a good first impression on him."

"You'll have to excuse him. Massimo was always looking out for me when we were growing up, taking all of Father's harsh discipline and wrath, both my share of it and his. So he still tends to be overprotective of me."

"Yes, I could see the overprotective part of him the other night." Philippe-Auguste set his glass down on the scuffed wood mantle of the fireplace and took a couple of steps forward.

Marcello breathed in deep, savoring the dark

dangerous scent of him. An alarming thought occurred to him. "How did you know where we lived?"

"I have my ways." Again, the Frenchman gave that secretive smile.

"Why are you so interested in me anyhow?"

"Aren't you full of questions tonight?" Philippe-Auguste chuckled as he started to slowly circle Marcello. "Why wouldn't I be attracted to you? You have the warmest brown eyes I've ever encountered. The instant you looked at me with that caring, yet innocent gaze of yours, I knew I had to meet you."

"I'm not that innocent." Marcello shuddered in desire when the Frenchman trailed a hand up his arm. "I had my first female when I was just a youth in my early teen years." For some reason, this comment made the Frenchman laugh.

"There is a lot in this world of which you have no knowledge." Philippe-Auguste leaned in and spoke close to his ear. "Things I would love to show you. All you have to do is agree."

"What kind of things?" Marcello could not hold back the moan of desire that slipped from his lips.

"That's not how it works," Philippe-Auguste chided as he leaned forward and nipped Marcello's ear lobe. "You have to tell me you agree first."

"Just like I had to formally invite you inside."

Marcello's voice was thick with need as his cock grew hard and pushed against the opening of his robe. "You seem to have a lot of rules."

"Tell me you agree," Philippe-Auguste crooned in an almost hypnotic voice. He took Marcello's earlobe back in between his front teeth and tugged again.

"I agree." Marcello sucked in a breath as his cock grew even harder, now completely jutting out of the front of his robe, almost as if it were waving.

"That wasn't too difficult was it?" Philippe-Auguste asked. This time there was no mistaking the triumphant glee in his brown eyes. A shot of fear hit Marcello in the chest as he once again felt the chilling sense of peril just being near this man. Then Philippe-Auguste wrapped his hand around Marcello's cock and all thoughts, save for lust, drifted away.

"Where is your brother?" the Frenchman asked as he gave a gentle squeeze.

"He's out for the evening." Marcello closed his eyes and let out a moan as Philippe-Auguste began to pump his hand up and down.

"So that means we are all alone?" He opened his fist and began to trail his fingers up and down the length of Marcello's erection.

"Yes, it's just us here," Marcello admitted as a fine sheen of sweat broke out over his forehead.

"Does that frighten you?" One finger slowly trailed up the tender underside of Marcello's cock.

Marcello shook his head as he rocked his hips forward into the man's touch.

"It should frighten you." Philippe-Auguste dropped to his knees, his face level with Marcello's pelvis. "It should frighten you very much."

Before Marcello could think on his words, Philippe-Auguste leaned forward and took his cock in his mouth. Marcello nearly yelled with desire as sweet, wet heat enveloped him from root to tip. No one had ever been able to take all of his thick length in at once and yet Philippe-Auguste managed it as if it were nothing. Pulling back slowly, inch by inch, he sucked in so hard, Marcello felt his knees grow weak. "I'm going to fall," he cried as his cock pulled out from between the man's lips with a loud *pop*.

"No, you won't fall. You will stand there and take it." Philippe-Auguste gave him a simmering look that was one of pure domination. "I want to you take mind of how it's done as well. Someday soon, it will be you who is on his knees."

"I promise, I will," Marcello chanted as Philippe-Auguste started to suck him again. He would, too, his mouth watered with the need to know what the Frenchman tasted like. How heady it would be to have control of Philippe-Auguste's



pleasure.

He had the urge to fist his hands in the man's light hair, but did not dare. He sensed that Philippe-Auguste wouldn't even allow him that much control of their encounter. Instead, he dropped them to his sides and concentrated on keeping his knees from buckling out from under him.

The Frenchman used his tongue, lips and fingers to bring Marcello to the brink. A couple of times, there was something sharp. It possibly was his teeth, but as soon as that brief bit of pain registered, a velvet caress soothed it away.

"Yes, like that," Marcello panted as he fought the impulse to thrust forward into Philippe-Auguste's face.

The pleasure built until Marcello came in a blinding explosion. As his seed shot from his cock, he tried to pull back, but Philippe-Auguste grabbed his hips with a growl and held him in place. Panting, Marcello gazed down at the man as he eagerly drank in his semen. When Philippe-Auguste drained him, he released Marcello's limp cock and stood. "Please," Marcello said although he had no idea what he was begging for or why.

Philippe-Auguste reached for the sash of Marcello's robe.

Excitement, fear, anxiety and desire all battled for supremacy inside Marcello as he realized the

Frenchman was going to fuck him. Even though it should have been impossible so soon after his previous orgasm, he felt his cock grow hard again in anticipation.

Just as he was working the knot free, Philippe-Auguste jerked his head up in alarm. A low snarl rumbled in the Frenchman's chest.

For Marcello, it was unlike anything he had heard any man make before. It was almost like a caged beast. Even though it should have terrified him, it only made Marcello want him more.

"I have to go," Philippe-Auguste said as he moved away.

*What? Go?* That was the last thing he wanted. Despair swept through Marcello and he found himself reaching out for the Frenchman. "Stay, please," he begged.

"I'm sorry. I don't like leaving things half-finished anymore than you do." He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss against Marcello's lips. "I will be back, I promise you."

Then the Frenchman left so fast, Marcello barely saw him. Stunned, he blinked his eyes to make sure they were functioning properly. It was almost as if he had vanished into thin air. Rushing from the parlor, he discovered that the front door was open.

"Philippe-Auguste!" he yelled as he ran out onto the cobbled streets only to find them deserted

and eerily quiet.

In the short time he'd been inside with the Frenchman, the night seemed to have grown much darker and the air colder. Marcello let a shiver that had nothing to do with the frigid temperature. It felt as if someone was watching him from the shadows—stalking him.

There was a scurrying sound off to his right, between two houses. It sounded as if something with huge claws was running on the hard ground. It was too loud to be a rat or some other vermin. Marcello's heart thumped hard in his chest as the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

"Philippe-Auguste, is that you?" he called. He wished he had a weapon handy, but all he had were his fists, which suddenly seemed so inadequate. He waited for an answering reply, but all that came were more clacking sounds followed by a loud hiss that seemed to go on forever.

Marcello spun around, trying to determine where it came from, but it seemed to surround him. He wanted to run, but he didn't know what way to go. Even the short distance to the house seemed daunting, as he wasn't for sure that his stalker was there, waiting to pounce. "Who's out there? Show yourself!" he demanded with much more bravado than he really felt.

There was a rush of air as something jumped on his back and took him down to the ground.

## CHAPTER SIX

Marcello's head hit the stone street so hard that his vision got dark around the edges. Shaking it off, he struggled to get up, only to find that he could not fight the iron grip of his attacker. Blood ran into his eyes from a cut on his forehead, making it even more difficult to see. Blinking frantically, he cleared it up enough to look at his attacker.

It was a man with long, blond hair and black eyes that seemed to glow with evil malice. He was wearing all black, just like Philippe-Auguste, right down to the cape. Marcello tried to twist his body to throw the man off him, but he couldn't move enough to even do that.

"Be still," the man hissed, showing a pair of long, white fangs.

"What are you?" Marcello stared in horror at the creature on top of him. It *was* a creature because no man he knew had teeth or strength like this.

"I am the thing nightmares come from." He bared his fangs even more and bent over Marcello's neck.

Marcello tried to punch him, but the monster easily dodged his blows. Striking quickly, he sank his fangs deep into Marcello's throat. A deep burning pain made him yell out. Soon the scream became a gurgled moan as the blond man continued to rip at his throat.

"No wonder Philippe-Auguste chose you." The man licked his blood-stained lips. "You do taste so sweet."

When he struck again, Marcello tried to yell for help, but nothing came out. Lungs screamed for air as he tried to suck it into his body, but nothing could get by the ruined flesh. His hands fell uselessly to his sides as his entire body went limp.

*So this is how I'm going to die. Who will care for Massimo now? Will Philippe-Auguste ever know what became of me? Will Caprice ever know how much I truly loved her? How I wished I could hold her in my arms one last time.*

He felt a cool wrist pressed to his lips, the skin wet from something.

"Drink," his attacker urged.

*Drink?* If he could have, Marcello would have given a hysterical laugh. He couldn't breathe, much less drink. Yet, as soon as the coppery, salty taste hit his lips, he found his tongue flicking out

to lap up the liquid. Some distant part of him knew he was swallowing blood and yet he couldn't have pulled away, even if the creature hadn't injured him.

"That's it," the man cooed. "Drink. Then you will belong to me and not Philippe-Auguste. I can't wait to see how he reacts when he finds out his newest love is now my pet."

A sharp, burning pain hit Marcello's stomach like a punch. He tried to curl up against the agony, but the man kept him in a firm hold. Wave after wave of intense hurt went through him until tears built up in his eyes. The entire time, the blond kept his wrist firmly against Marcello's lips.

"I know it hurts, and I'm sorry," the man soothed, in a tone that didn't sound sorry at all. No, it sounded almost excited as if Marcello's agony was an aphrodisiac. "But when it's over you will be more invincible...more powerful than any mere mortal. You should be thanking me."

*Yes, I'll get around to that once I am through vomiting from the pain,* Marcello thought frantically.

A group of young men came ambling down the street, their loud drunken voices carrying through the night. The man jerked his head up with a gasp. "This is most unwelcome," he spat as he sprang to his feet.

Marcello immediately rolled up into a tight ball as his stomach clenched into another painful

spasm. The ache slowly spread out until his whole body felt as if it were on fire. He was barely conscious when the man leaned down and whispered, "This is far from over. You make sure you tell Philippe-Auguste that."

The man left Marcello alone in his anguish. The group of drunkards wasn't any help. They just passed him by, too caught up in the bawdy song to pay attention to anything else. Weakly, he tried to crawl to the door of his house. Halfway there, he had to give up as another burst of pain went through him. Everything grew hazy as he finally gave into blessed unconsciousness.

Marcello didn't know how long he lay on the street until he woke up to Massimo shaking him by the shoulders. "Marcello! What is wrong with you?" His brother's voice sounded frantic with concern. "Wake up, please."

"Vampire," Marcello whispered, not even opening his eyes. He didn't have the strength needed for the task. "A vampire did this to me." Now that the word came from his lips, everything made sense to Marcello, even though the idea was pure madness.

"You are crazy with fever," Massimo said as he scooped Marcello up and started to carry him to the house.

"The vampire ripped my throat out." Marcello's

head lolled against his brother's chest.

"It was just a dream," Massimo soothed in a soft voice Marcello never imagined him capable. "There isn't even a scratch on you."

"Yes, he bit me," Marcello frowned, but whatever retort Massimo may have had was lost on him as he slipped into another deep slumber.

The next time he woke was to a cool, soft hand touching his head. Opening his eyes, he found it was Caprice, her eyes swollen from crying and her nose red. Her normal snapping brown eyes were bleak with despair and her hair hung around her pale face in complete disarray. Marcello realized he was in Caprice's bed and was stripped of all his clothes—his only covering, a thin blanket. The pain was still there, in addition to an overwhelming thirst.

"Caprice, we shouldn't be here," Massimo's voice carried from somewhere in the room. "Marcello would never forgive himself if you caught the plague because of him."

"Hush," Caprice spat, her look venomous. "If you leave, then who will care for him? You told me yourself that you couldn't find a doctor to come as they are already overwhelmed with so many people falling ill."

"I'll take care of him," Massimo replied in such a broken tone it tugged at Marcello's heart.



"Yes, you will," Caprice conceded as she wet a cloth and ran it over Marcello's fevered brow. "And I will stay to help you. Now, stop fighting me on this and grab me a fresh bowl of water."

"I love you, Caprice," Marcello breathed.

"I love you." She smoothed a hand over Marcello's hair. "I love both of you. We will face this together."

Marcello wanted to tell them that it wasn't the plague making him sick. When the male had attacked him, he'd infected Marcello with something much worse than a simple disease. No, now he was cursed. Closing his eyes, he could hear the blood rushing through Caprice's voluptuous body. The thirst grew as he imagined how it would be if he had his own fangs. How it would feel to use them as he pinned Caprice down and screwed her as he bit her and drank. He just knew she would taste so sweet. "*Vampiro*," he moaned.

"Shh..." Caprice stoked his cheek. "You're just dreaming again. There is no such thing as vampires."

As Marcello drifted off again, he knew that she was wrong. There *were* such things as vampires and he was becoming one of them.

\* \* \* \*

Philippe-Auguste watched Caprice's house for

two days, waiting for Massimo to leave. Marcello would be dead by morning if he could not tend to him. He must complete his transformation. He closed his eyes, remembering the taste and scent of the man he now knew he loved. He saw shadows in the top floor of the house, knew this was Caprice's bedroom and that both she and Massimo never left his side.

He was enraged that Thais should have followed him here and attempted to take Marcello for his own. He was sorry now to have beaten him at *Punto Banco*, but he had been in luck. The blond Greek prince had not been so lucky.

It was bad enough the man was hiring *puttane* out of the *castalletto*, the municipal brothel, and killing them. Now his tastes had strayed to the soul houses and the poor women recovering from their lives in the *castalletto*. He, obviously, found it amusing to kill former *puttane*. This was bad enough...but to attempt to seduce Marcello...this was unacceptable.

Thais would pay for this ill-advised game of chance.

He clenched his fists until his nails dug hard enough into his palms to make them bleed. There was something else Massimo prized and that was a good bet. He hated to do it, but he needed to lure Massimo out of the house. Soon.

Philippe-Auguste walked briskly along the

canal, enjoying the scent of cinnamon from the bakery, past the crumbling archways of the entrance of the magnificent *palazzo* owned by the courtesan, Emporia. He was charmed by the flower-strewn water fountain in the courtyard and passed through, glimpsing her splendid library through an open balcony door. Though she prided her great literary collection on money she earned writing sonnets, everybody in Venice knew she was a courtesan. She lived like royalty and, as her servant opened the front door, an astonishing piece wrought from iron and inches-thick poplar wood, he was struck once again by the sheer sensuality of every item in her house.

As he waited in the marble-floored foyer, his gaze flew to the high ceilings, which reflected the light from numerous stained glass windows. Wood panels depicting scenes of rural life lined the walls, illuminated by Murano glass chandeliers.

The curtains were all made of the finest velvet, banded in gold brocade. He reached out a hand, felt the rich thickness and was reminded again of Marcello's soft skin.

"Come, you must see my new treasure."

Philippe-Auguste glanced up the sweeping staircase to see his hostess extending a hand to him.

She really was a beautiful woman in her silk

gown the color of champagne. Her hair, piled high and decorated with Baroque crystals was in itself another thing of exquisite beauty.

"You take my breath away," he said with humble sincerity.

Emporia inclined her head, accepting his compliment and beckoned her long, beautiful fingers to him.

He took her hand and mounted the stairs, knowing he could easily afford to keep her, yet felt no inclination to sample the earthly charms of his captivating hostess.

"Look. Isn't it precious?"

He moved across the salon where she held her nightly entertainments. He stood before the astonishing gothic altarpiece and his first thought was, *how and where did she get this?* He allowed the stunning workmanship of the easily ten feet by six feet piece to wash over him for a moment. Then he gave his attention to the detail. The Byzantine painting was, he suspected, enamel. It depicted Mary, mother of Jesus with her infant son on her lap. The frame, almost a foot wide wrought from gold and silver, was encrusted with thousands of jewels and pearls.

He finally stepped back. His fingers longed to feel the smoothness of the pearls, just as his heart longed for possession of the piece.

She was waiting, her chest heaving with

excitement. He didn't disappoint her.

"I put it at Constantinople, maybe five hundred years old." He did not add, *Stolen, I am sure*, though the words hovered just on the tip of his tongue.

Emporia clasped her hands to her chest, jumping up and down daintily. "Yes, Constantinople. A gift from my...benefactor."

"He must be truly besotted." Philippe-Auguste gave her his most charming smile, revising his opinion on being able to afford to keep such a woman. For a moment, the joy of knowing Caprice would require no more than a constant supply of paint as well as a constant supply of cock, dazzled him and he remembered the urgency of his call. "I wish you to help me on a matter of...the heart."

"Oh, yes?" Emporia was a great believer in love, he knew, and he was about to explain his problem when she pulled a cord beside her. The servant who'd opened the front door to him now stood beside his employer.

"Is the mortarolo ready?" she asked. On the servant's nod, her almond eyes showed her pleasure. "In that case, two slices please, Peron, and I think we'll take some Prosecco."

The servant disappeared and Emporia led the way to the sofa near the window overlooking the canal.

Philippe-Auguste started to speak, but she held her hand up and they sat in companionable silence until the servant, Peron, returned with an elaborate tray. It held thick slices of the pie Philippe-Auguste had come to relish. Layered with meats, eggs and several cheeses and studded with slices of bacon, he inhaled the scent of the still-warm spices. He detected nutmeg, pepper and cloves.

He approved heartily when he saw the spidery hand-written label on the sparkling white wine. *Conegliano*. It was an excellent year for the hilly vine. He almost forgot his anxiety in the moment he took his first sip. Ah...he was certain by the lack of acidity that the grapes came from the Valdobbiadene hills. His toes curled in near-orgasmic pleasure inside his boots. Philippe-Auguste took three famished bites of the flaky, divine mortarolo before mentioning his quest.

"I am finding myself in a quandary," he said in a confessional tone. He had prepared his speech and quickly topped up Emporia's glass before continuing. "I want to visit, just briefly with Caprice, but Massimo does monopolize her. Is there any chance you can lure him here this evening?"

She started to protest, but he cut her off, delicately with the one thing guaranteed to earn her compliance. He produced a leather pouch

filled with coins. She opened it and he saw her glee, and her undisguised greed.

"What is it that you want me to do exactly?"

"Organize a small game of chance. He favors *Punto Banco*."

"It does not favor him," she countered. "He frequently loses."

He handed her a second pouch. "Which is why you are going to give him this stake."

She opened it up and her eyes widened. "There must be fifty gold *zecchino* in here." She glanced at him in wonder. "She means so much to you—Caprice?"

"Yes," he said, feeling the truth pulling at his heart and his loins. He loved them all. Massimo would take time, but after tonight, would be on his side. Marcello had easily won his heart, losing as he had the night they met over a competitive round of *Punto Banco*. Marcello, unlike his twin, knew when to stop throwing the dice and, after three consecutive losses, had walked away from the game.

Massimo had the fever of the game and for a moment, Philippe-Auguste regretted encouraging his run of bad luck. In the end, he would tame Massimo, he would seduce and keep him sated with his cock.

Emporia closed the pouches in her hand. "I will do it. I will send a message to Francesco to bring

his card table here. And then I will send a message to Massimo, letting him know he is invited." She leaned over Philippe-Auguste so that he was now staring straight down her décolleté. "If we were ever to join forces, we would have such riches."

He stared into her upturned face and she sensed his hidden danger. In that moment, he could tell. Outwardly, he remained playful, capturing a fallen tendril of her lush, dark hair in his fingers, but he glimpsed her sudden uncertainty.

Emporia set about making her plans. "Music, do you think? My friend, Emilio, has developed a wonderful new form of song. They call it the *madrigal*. Quite uplifting."

Philippe-Auguste smiled. "You should read your poetry. I am particularly fond of the sonnets you have written about your stay at the *Ca'Balbi*."

Her eyes widened, then she threw herself at his feet. "You know these poems? You remember them?"

How he wished now he'd spent more time listening to the drivel she'd recited at so many salons. He searched frantically in his memory banks and produced one line that would convince her of his sincerity. "I have but one option, to turn inward on my soul, for my heart in balance remembers what my mind can still not fully appreciate," he recited.



She mouthed the words along with him and her face shone.

"More than anything," he said, determined to bring some truth to this encounter, "I am impressed by your way with words. I am impressed by your writing, by your published works at a time when most women in your country can neither read, nor write."

She looked like she was going to faint from the compliment. Emporia rose and laid a hand on his cheek. "I hope Caprice appreciates your artistic soul," she murmured and rang the bell for Peron.

He mingled with the guests Emporia hastily assembled. Peron and his wife lit the candle sconces and the chandeliers. Wine flowed, guests ate tiny, succulent sugared apples and then Emporia caught his eye. This was the signal that Massimo had arrived.

Philippe-Auguste slipped out of the warm house, sorry he could not stay to enjoy more wine. He pictured enjoying both Marcello and Caprice at Emporia's house, then knowing that he couldn't. His love for the Visconti twins must remain a private matter.

His step was brisk, the night air bracing him for the moment when he would claim his male lover for his own. Outside her house, Philippe-Auguste could hear Caprice's voice. She talked in soothing

tones, but received no response. He glanced over his shoulder in both directions and took the plunge, flying straight up to her room.

She did not see him. She was busy painting and he was pleased to see she had new canvases lined against the wall. He landed softly on the other side of the balcony window, his cape closing around him. Her chestnut hair gleamed in the glow of candlelight and she held her long paintbrush in her right hand, her head tilted as she examined her work.

"You look like a reposing swan," she said with a laugh, glancing at the bed in which Marcello laid delirious, half-dead with fever.

The painting, almost finished by the looks of things, showed a reclining woman, a piece of pomegranate and half a fig on a small table beside her. Figs were the latest euphemism for the emerging word, *fuck*. He adored the word fuck. It was both opulent and primal. The figure in the painting had a long, pale arm extended toward the fruit, indicating her carnal desires. Her hair tumbled enticingly along her bare shoulder and arm.

In sharp contrast with art, Marcello's eyes were puffy slits, which opened a little as he sensed Philippe-Auguste's presence. His long hair lay in damp strands on his pillow, his skin sallow.

*I am here*, he telepathed, actively inserting

himself into Marcello's addled thoughts. He was pleased at what he found when he invaded them. Marcello was in the middle of a dream, remembering the moment he, Philippe-Auguste, took possession of his cock and sucked him as nobody ever had before.

For a moment, it surprised him that Caprice was painting her lover as he lay on his deathbed, but in truth, it didn't. It pleased him. It meant she was serious about her burgeoning career. He was already a fan of her work and watched the way she applied the extra coat of egg wash with her fingertips.

Marcello gazed up at him and his glazed eyes opened, as if he was certain Philippe-Auguste was still in his dreams. The poor man's mouth could barely move. As he stepped toward him, he could feel the rage of fever emanating from Marcello and vowed once again to destroy the Greek vampire, Thais. *How dare Thais do this to you, Marcello.*

*Help me,* Marcello said in Philippe-Auguste's mind.

Philippe-Auguste pulled back the sheet covering Marcello's naked body. The soaked sheet felt like he was peeling off his lover's skin and, as Caprice kept painting, adding layers of paint, Marcello's hand fell between the slashes of leather and crimson ruffles of Philippe-Auguste's shirt. For one brief, sweet moment, their lips collided.

Marcel's cock stirred, in spite of his fever. Philippe-Auguste felt his own cock responding. He took the wet strands from his lover's face and pushed them away. He wished he could ice him down as Marcello's body inclined toward him, instinct urging him to mate to fruition.

Philippe-Auguste moved him back to the damp bed, kissing him. Marcello's mouth opened to him and their tongues met. Philippe-Auguste licked from his man's dry, cracked lip down his chin.

Cloudbursts of lust parted in Philippe-Auguste's brain. His tongue moved down the salty-tasting throat. He felt Marcello's pulse quicken, his breathing growing shallower now, and he hastened to his cock, which was very hard. Philippe-Auguste licked the head and glanced up at his man. "Do you want this?" he asked.

"Yes, I want it," Marcello responded, tears running down his cheeks. He whispered, "I want *you*. I want you more than any woman."

Caprice jumped when she heard their voices.

Marcello was reacting to his man's tongue on his cock, on his trembling thighs.

Philippe-Auguste pushed his legs apart, his teeth elongated now...*I must hurry.*

Caprice tried to pull Philippe-Auguste away from her prone lover, but it was as if she realized he was there to help, not hurt Marcello.

*I want to be yours. Please hurry...please, my love.*

Marcello's voice shrieked from somewhere deep within him. Rarely had a human had such an effect on him.

Philippe-Auguste's mouth moved to Marcello's hot ass hole and Caprice gasped when she watched him lick Marcello.

For Philippe-Auguste, it was intoxicating to have his woman watch him take his male lover.

"Soon, I will pleasure you this way," he told her, lifting his face for a moment from Marcello's needy body. His elongated teeth made licking increasingly difficult, but Marcello's ecstatic response was its own reward.

"Take your clothes off," Marcello whimpered and Caprice helped the Frenchman remove everything quickly. They both struggled with his boots and hose, but at last, he looked at him in all his glory and he could tell she was pleased.

"You have the biggest cock I have ever seen," she breathed, touching it with tentative fingertips.

Philippe-Auguste cringed inwardly, hoping Marcello would not be put off by this, but one glance told him his momentary panic was for naught. Marcello fixed his gaze on him in a predatory way.

He knew he'd been right, that Marcello would be the perfect mate. He almost crowed when Marcello put his hands in Philippe-Auguste's hair, the way he wanted, the way he should have when

the Frenchman had knelt before him sucking his cock. Raw need tremored through Marcello's body, which shook with fever. His legs opened wider. He was Philippe-Auguste's sexual sacrifice. Philippe-Auguste's cock was hard and ready for his man. Marcello moaned when he took his tongue from his ass and turned his head. It was as if he knew what he needed.

Philippe-Auguste tried to enter him, but missed. He had never been a clumsy lover...*my God...what is happening to me?* He poked again and Caprice stepped forward, taking his thick shaft in her paint-stained fingers and pointed him at Marcello's ass.

"Please take me," Marcello said again.

"Save him," she whispered and their gazes collided as Philippe-Auguste entered Marcello. Caprice was on the floor, kissing his face, her mouth on Marcello's when Philippe-Auguste claimed Marcello as his. He bit Marcello's neck and Marcello held Philippe-Auguste's head to him. Philippe-Auguste saw nothing but pleasure when it was Marcello's turn to feed from his lover's arm.

Caprice stroked Philippe-Auguste's back as he fucked Marcello. He could not believe how lovely the man felt. He craved Caprice, yes, but nothing compared to being inside Marcello. He didn't think about coming, he thought only about

Marcello's release, only of the young Italian's complete gratification.

Her hand moved to Philippe-Auguste's ass and she stroked it. His cock jumped anew. It amazed him how good it felt to have her participation, her tender, possessive touch. Now, he could not wait to lay claim to her sweet, womanly body. He gently removed his arm from Marcello's fierce and gripping teeth.

He licked the puncture marks closed as Marcello begged again for his cock.

Enthralled, Caprice clearly wanted to be a part of the illicit union taking place in her bed. Not too long ago, a sodomite had been burned alive in Venice, but Philippe-Auguste was too careful and too powerful to allow anything to happen to the men he loved.

He kissed her and kissed Marcello's face, his heartbeat faltering for just a second, but the color was back in Marcello's cheeks. He felt Caprice's fingers in his ass. Philippe-Auguste wanted to bring Marcello the release he promised him, that only he could give him, then he felt it.

Caprice must have sensed it, too, for her fingers moved between the two rutting men as Marcello poised on the verge of a shattering orgasm.

Fixated with Philippe-Auguste's cock being inside her partner, her hand moved to the drenched cock sliding in and out of Marcello.

Philippe-Auguste knew she wanted to feel it, wanted to be a part of it, but he felt no jealousy. He felt her curious and alive. When Marcello started to come, he shouted Philippe-Auguste's name. He shouted for Caprice, shouted that he loved them both and held onto his man's shoulders.

"Please come inside me, make me yours," Marcello implored.

Philippe-Auguste grabbed Marcello's cock in his hand, moving Caprice's hand aside. "For now, this is mine," he rasped.

Her hand moved to Marcello's face. She urged Marcello to fulfillment and, as he came, Philippe-Auguste looked into his eyes.

"I loved you before I even met you, when you were but a dream."

Marcello exploded all over Philippe-Auguste's hand and belly, all over both their bodies and Caprice watched, knowing in that moment, that Philippe-Auguste erupted within their shared lover.

"God!" Marcello shouted when he felt the orgasm inside him. "Oh God!" His legs tightened around Philippe-Auguste who could feel Marcello's orgasm continue deep within him. He felt Marcello's joy, his life force returning.

Caprice rocked back on her knees. "It was never like this with me!"



"I love you," Philippe-Auguste told them both.

"And I love both of you for saving me," Marcello murmured. His man and his woman took turns giving him hot, loving kisses.

"Philippe-Auguste, I want my turn," she pouted.

"I want Marcello still, my love. I am still inside him and his cock is still very hard. Suck him for me, then I promise to pleasure you all night long."

She didn't hesitate.

Philippe-Auguste knew Marcello wanted to come again.

"I will stay inside you until you come, my love," he said. He moved slowly, gently, aware this was Marcello's first time, but also knew Marcello wanted Philippe-Auguste to fuck him.

The greedy lips suckling him brought him to full hardness very quickly.

"No one else could ever satisfy me," Marcello moaned. "I need both of you. Nothing...nobody...this has never happened to me before."

Philippe-Auguste kept moving inside his man, taking his time, stroking his belly, his tongue flicking at the lips and throat, hot and moist from carnal desire, not pending death now.

"This is how it will be. There will always be a mouth on you, a cock inside you, a cock to fulfill your every desire," Philippe-Auguste said.

Marcello clutched his back and Philippe-Auguste fucked him harder now. He felt his sweet lover's legs opening wider, both of them drenched in sweat and come. He gazed down at his man, lost to the sensations of fucking each other, almost forgetting Caprice was there.

She was helping him fulfill the man they loved, helping to bring him complete and utter bliss. Marcello laughed and cried all at the same time, and suddenly, his face went slack.

Philippe-Auguste knew he was feeling the unaccustomed pressure on his prostate now and that Marcello had no idea what it was.

Philippe-Auguste wanted so much for the prostate to bring Marcello pleasure...some men didn't like it, but Philippe-Auguste knew it could bring the strongest orgasm a man could know.

Caprice sensed something was different and lifted her ruby lips from Marcello's shaft.

"Don't stop now," he implored.

She resumed her sucking, hanging on to keep Marcello in her mouth.

Philippe-Auguste had to lift back a little to accommodate her.

Marcello's face softened as his prostate grew used to the arousal Philippe-Auguste's cock induced and he began to scream.

"Oh, fuck me!" He came very hard, his gaze on Philippe-Auguste's face, surprise and intense

delight swamping his senses.

Philippe-Auguste kissed him, his fingers and tongue easing the tiny entrance wounds on Marcello's throat.

As Marcello's release waned, Caprice lifted her face.

"Now it's my turn," she said. "Please, please fuck me."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Did it hurt?” Geovanna asked her for the seventh or eighth time.

Caprice laughed. She felt as if the whole of Venice...no, the whole of Italy must know that she had made love to two men and one had fucked her ass as the other licked her pussy to the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced in her life.

She picked up her glass of *Nocino*, and savored the taste of the liqueur. She loved the flavor of the green, unripe walnuts. She held the thick, brown liquid in her mouth for a moment. She and Geovanna had somehow come under the favor of the old ladies who sold packets of maize for visitors to Piazza San Marco to feed the square’s numerous pigeons.

The old ladies dribbled the liqueur into cracked cups for the two friends, now enjoying the waning day in the cooling mists from the canals. The lamp lighter went from lamp to lamp, lighting the

candles in each holder. A stray bird, evidently unaware he should be sleeping at night, pecked the ground for crumbs.

"You leave the cups here." The old ladies pointed to a flowerpot standing against the wall.

Caprice, feeling a sudden burst of love for all humanity, jumped up and hugged the two women who cackled and lumbered home, their chatter a little more merry for their shot of alcoholic comfort.

Anal sex had hurt, but in truth, what hurt more was the itchy place at her left breast, a large blue vein where Philippe-Auguste had claimed her. It had been an erotic, emotional experience and suffused with a spiritual striptease, stronger even than anything she experienced with the twins. It was an orgasm of her soul, not her body, and she looked forward to a repeat performance.

But she could not tell Geovanna any of this.

Sex between men was illegal and she felt protective of her new family. She felt a heart full of love and a weakness in her belly when she remembered how Philippe-Auguste had bathed after taking Marcello, who watched and helped Philippe-Auguste take Caprice as his lover as well. She had spent many nights with the Visconti twins, but neither man showed an interest in the other, but then, they were brothers after all.

She wondered how Philippe-Auguste would

seduce Massimo, for he had made it clear he desired a *quartetto*, a foursome.

"This way, each of us always has a lover. We will always have a partner," he had said and she wondered if such passion were possible.

She worried about Massimo. Geovanna had come to the house and told her and Marcello that he'd come into an unexpected gift of money from a secret admirer and lost it all on the dice games at Emporia's salons.

"He lost it all, they say, to a Greek lord who lent him more money, also lost."

Philippe-Auguste had hidden in her bedroom, listening to the exchange. He urged Caprice to go out with Geovanna.

"Marcello will find Massimo and bring him home. I will protect you and provide for you all," he said. "I am sorry for this interruption."

He and Marcello had both kissed her, deeply, and after taking Geovanna's arm, Caprice strolled to the Piazza with her, giving her lovers a chance to leave the house unnoticed.

She could not disguise or deny her new joy, but she knew she could not tell Geovanna the whole truth so she simply said she enjoyed her first taste of anal sex.

"It is not like anything I imagined," she said, taking another sip of her liqueur. She was astonished at the array of emotions exploding

continuously in her now. She found she needed only a little food, only a sip of wine and it was enough...more than enough. It dazzled her mind until she thought she could hear the whispers of brick walls, of pigeons and even her friend's inner gloom.

Geovanna was petrified of being abandoned. Caprice realized that now. The fear was contagious because now Caprice was afraid to be on the streets at dawn. Her first full day as a vampire had brought exhaustion and lust for all the senses in equal doses. They'd closed the blinds on the day and Philippe-Auguste warned her she needed to be home by five o'clock in the morning.

*Five!* She had no urge to be outdoors much longer, but now that she knew Geovanna was so unhappy and a little jealous, it seemed that Caprice could postpone her own happiness for a few minutes longer. The irony was not lost on Caprice. It had usually been the other way around. Caprice had always been the lonely one, Geovanna, the one with men lusting after her.

"I admit it's different," Geovanna said, harping back to the matter of anal intercourse. "But did it hurt when Marcello went the back way?"

"A little, at first, but the pleasure, the physical sensations surprised me."

"That, for me, is still something I aspire to," Geovanna said, recovering a little of her

trademark humor. "I can't drink all this. Do you want the rest of mine?"

Caprice shook her head. It struck her as strange that as Massimo was losing his newfound wealth, she was losing her mind to her two new vampire lovers. It had of course, been Philippe-Auguste who claimed her virgin ass as he had Marcello's, but she could say none of this to anyone. The rumors of vampires had been rampant in Venice and many plague victims were accused of being vampires.

She heard they rushed victims of the plague to an infirmary on a small island nearby, dead and buried within a week of their enforced captivity. She heard of mass graves being dug every day and she shivered in the growing cold night air.

Massimo had not come home after losing his new fortune. Caprice, after ignoring Geovanna's many visits to her home, had finally caved in and allowed her entry after Marcello and Philippe-Auguste kissed her goodbye and went in search of Massimo.

This evening, everything tasted better to her, colors were sharper, the smells and textures of everything crisper, cleaner...brighter since her transformation.

"You seem different," Geovanna said.

Caprice jolted back to the present. "Different, how?"



"You seem calmer, not so...neurotic."

"Neurotic?" Caprice felt wounded and quite astounded. "Is that how you see me?" She could not be offended though, when her friend's distress was so acute. "What's the matter?" she asked Geovanna. "I have never seen you like this. You're not...you're not sick are you?"

"My special friend..." Geovanna's gaze dropped to the ground, "Baldovino, my benefactor seems to have tired of me. He seems to want the real thing now, a real boy, not a woman masquerading as one."

Caprice didn't hesitate to calm her friend's fears. "It is illegal for him to be with a man. Geovanna, he is quite intoxicated by you." She paused. "You are still living on his property, are you not?"

It was the custom in the homes of cheating Venetian nobility for the mistresses of men to have a small apartment somewhere on the grounds of their estates. She had supported Geovanna's move to her lover's home, even if she had just a tiny apartment above the horse stables.

Geovanna rarely named her lover since he was powerful and important. He not only brought rare and exotic foods to Venice, he was now a local magistrate. Caprice secretly thought Baldovino hideous. He once told Geovanna she looked like one of his prized horses, a fact which drove

Geovanna to tears.

Caprice had understood Geovanna's desire to be the lover of her magistrate's dreams, but Caprice was the one who smuggled her to the small private hospital with her own money when Geovanna had contracted *venerea*.

At the time, neither friend spoke the obvious, that he was evidently seeing others on the side. Now, it was something Geovanna would have to face. He was a canny one, the equine magistrate. He kept his love affairs close to the vest or in his case, close to the cock, but it pained Caprice to see her friend so grievously hurt by his straying affections.

"Oh, yes, I am still there and he comes to me at night, but he is frankly quite brutal with me now." Geovanna's jeweled fingers loosened the fichu around her neck. "He has not said he doesn't want me, but a woman knows these things, Caprice."

Caprice leaned forward. "What are those red spots at your throat?" she asked.

"It is the heat. It is nothing, but a rash."

Caprice wanted to question her, but her attention was taken by a blond man who mysteriously appeared beside her.

"Good evening, Caprice," he said. "I've been longing to meet you."

\* \* \* \*

They moved through the streets like wraiths. They moved faster than he ever had on foot and Marcello started to feel like an Olympic runner, and yet their feet didn't touch the ground. He imagined this was how the great athletes felt, possessed of super human powers. He was aware of Philippe-Auguste's heartbeat in his head and wondered how this was possible. Was it just his imagination?

Overwhelmed by his conflicting feelings for his French conqueror, Marcello had no time to analyze his thoughts. He worried about Caprice whose beauty was only stronger now due to her transformation. He felt her stirring inside him, too, and then, Philippe-Auguste was tugging at his shoulder.

On the outskirts of the *sestieri*, the district of *Castello*, Marcello took a deep breath and yet he felt no muscle aches, no tiredness. He felt alive and free. In the shadows of the dark night, he followed Philippe-Auguste to the *Corte Botera*, a secret courtyard below street level. They were on the verge of nothing here when Philippe-Auguste's fingers found the stone runes embedded in the walls of the ancient maze of streets. Philippe-Auguste turned to him and Marcello closed his eyes as his lover took his face in his hands and kissed him.

"We will bring him home," Philippe-Auguste said, biting gently on Marcello's bottom lip.

Marcello had no doubt of this, his senses swaying toward complete and sudden need for this man. Then he heard the muted screaming, the faint cries and Philippe-Auguste ran forward.

"Stay with me," he called over his shoulder, his long black cape flying as he took the long stairs down to the dank courtyard.

The noise level was deafening and as long as he lived, he would never forget the horror of what he saw next. A group of men crowded around a bear. It was not a large bear, but somebody removed his teeth, apparently recently since his mouth bled profusely. The group tied down the animal to two posts in the center of the courtyard as two wild dogs tore him to pieces. The bear, tied hard and tight and without its teeth, was unable to defend itself. He was unable to prevent the relentless and brutal attack. One of the dogs bit off the poor creature's remaining ear and the bear, blood streaming from its torn mouth and nose, bellowed into the sky. The sound was that of a baby screaming. Its eyes flew open, meeting Marcello's, its agonized helplessness tearing at him. Half the ruined, beautiful creature's nose dangled from its face and the bear wept again as the dogs attacked him once more.

All around this scene of grim carnage, Marcello

saw men throwing money at a man racing around collecting coins.

He was shocked to see his own brother there and suddenly the bear could take no more and reared up, landing awkwardly on one of the dogs. The bear's sheer size killed the dog outright. The sound of its neck breaking sent shivers down Marcello's spine.

"No!" Massimo screamed and in his frenzy, glanced up to find his horrified twin staring at him.

The bear-baiting, which Marcello had only ever heard about was officially over. The remaining rabid dog bit and barked at the bear, which lay collapsed on the rigid dog beneath him.

Marcello reached out a hand and touched the coarse fur. The bear twitched and he glanced at Philippe-Auguste beseechingly. Philippe-Auguste touched the bear's head as somebody scooped up the remaining wild dog, still drooling and snapping at everything in sight.

The bear took one last breath, its life force leaving him. Marcello's mouth opened in awe as he saw the spirit of the animal, its silver soul leaving its body. The bear glanced at them he imagined, in gratitude and loped away. Marcello was pleased to see the splendid animal was intact in death, unlike the rag of fur and bones left behind in the courtyard.

"It wasn't supposed to die," he heard someone saying. "It should have been good for another couple of years. Damned fools. They let the fight go on too long."

He was shocked to hear these words from his brother. He stood now and faced Massimo. "How could you condone this?"

"I don't condone it. I just want to win. I won a lot of money on the last fight." Massimo ran his hand through his hair. "I just lost it all when the bear rolled over on the stupid dog." He glanced at Philippe-Auguste. "What's he doing here?" his gaze returned to Marcello. "And I see you've returned to us. You look better than the last time I saw you."

Marcello opened his mouth to respond, but in his belly, an explosion of panic consumed him.

"It's Caprice," he whispered, seeing the blond man, who almost killed him, chasing her. "He is going to kill her."

\* \* \* \*

In a darkened column on the southern edge of the darkened Piazza San Marco, Caprice hid as the blond man she knew now was a vampire, chased and taunted her. He hissed his name...Tay-iss, it sounded like. She heard his accent. Greek. He was an aristocrat, but he meant to harm her.

"Here I am," he whispered repeatedly.

Now she saw him. Now, she didn't. Some instinct told her not to go home. In her home, he could corner her. Out in the open, she felt she could run.

He was back now and she wished she was home, in the safety of her bedroom. She closed her eyes, his horrible, foul breath on her face and suddenly, she was gone. When she opened her eyes, she was exactly where she'd wished, where she'd willed herself to be and a few seconds later, her three men were with her.

"My love!" Philippe-Auguste stepped forward and took her in his arms. He kissed her fears, assuaged her anxiety. Massimo seemed stunned as his twin and the Frenchman covered her face with kisses. She reached for Massimo, more relieved than anything that he was okay.

She kissed him and his hands stroked her pale face.

He started to say something, but she was excited now.

"I can't believe it," she told Philippe-Auguste. "That man..."

"Thais," he said, pronouncing it the way she'd heard it. *Tay-iss*.

"He was on me and I wished to be here and then...and then...here I was!"

Philippe-Auguste laughed. "You have such

powers now," he said, putting a possessive arm around her waist.

"What's going on here?" Massimo asked. "What is he doing here?"

"He's our lover," Caprice said defiantly.

Massimo stared at her in disbelief. "What has happened to you?" Massimo turned on his brother. "I thought I told you to stay away from him."

"He saved my life. And...and I love him."

"You...love him?" Massimo tore from the room, the others following him as he ran down the stairs. At the very bottom, Philippe-Auguste pinned him against the wall and put his hand to his throat.

"Join us...be with us."

"No," Massimo said, his eyes wide with fear. Marcello and Caprice watched as their lover seduced their fourth.

"God...no," Massimo said as Philippe-Auguste kissed him.

Caprice smiled. She loved watching the way Philippe-Auguste took command of the men who'd consumed her days and nights.

Philippe-Auguste fumbled inside Massimo's hose and pulled at his cock. Massimo resisted him and Philippe-Auguste continued to rub the thickening shaft inside the hose. Caprice was shocked at the way Massimo leaned against the wall, as if weakened by the Frenchman's touch.



"Your cock loves me. See how hard it becomes under my touch?"

"Yes, the traitor!" Massimo gasped. "It's already leaking for you."

Caprice and Marcello exchanged looks. "You bedded him already?" Marcello asked, furious, but Philippe-Auguste either ignored him or didn't hear him. He turned Massimo around, his face against the wall, his tongue working on Massimo's ass crack through the hose.

Massimo moaned as Philippe-Auguste licked him and rubbed himself against his ardent French lover.

"God help me," he mumbled. He shocked Caprice by begging for Philippe-Auguste tongue on his skin, but Philippe-Auguste zeroed in on Massimo's sweet hole through the thick hose. He slid them down finally, his tongue finding that hot little hole as Massimo braced himself against the wall.

Philippe-Auguste licked and sucked him, Massimo's ass jutted out as Philippe-Auguste kept sucking at him. Massimo opened his legs slightly, one hand moving back to his ass cheeks to give Philippe-Auguste better access. His cock was leaking, dripping, as Philippe-Auguste soon found when his hand moved to it. He slipped to the floor and Massimo mounted his face, riding it, feeding Philippe-Auguste that hard, hungry shaft.

Marcello turned to Caprice who hurled herself in his arms.

"Your mouth is so hot," Massimo screamed out.

As Marcello sucked at first one nipple through the low cut opening of her gown, then the other, she watched Massimo feeding Philippe-Auguste, then taking the cock away. She loved the way Philippe-Auguste controlled him finally by holding Massimo's ass in his hands.

"I love it when you control me," Marcello whispered in her ear, his hands lifting her dress over her head. Massimo said the same thing to Philippe-Auguste, who groaned as Massimo fucked his face.

When Massimo took that cock from him, Philippe-Auguste grabbed onto one of his balls with his greedy mouth and Massimo hissed.

Caprice watched as Massimo fed Philippe-Auguste his balls and she adored the way Philippe-Auguste sucked them until in a haze of passion, Massimo stuck his thickened, rigid cock straight down Philippe-Auguste's throat.

She took Marcello's hose, dropping to her knees on the staircase, suckling at his balls and cock.

"Oh, Caprice, I love you," he said. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Philippe-Auguste continue to suck Massimo's cock.

Massimo was watching his cock disappear down Philippe-Auguste's throat and then he took

it away from him.

Philippe-Auguste flipped over then, placing Massimo on his back on the marble floor. Massimo scrabbled with clutching fingers at Philippe-Auguste's back, begging for closer contact as Marcello had done.

"Open your legs, my little Italian whore," Philippe-Auguste said.

Caprice had never heard anything sexier said in her life.

Suddenly, Marcello switched her around, popped her on a step and opened her things, his mouth connecting with her little cherry.

"That's it, suck her," Philippe-Auguste shouted as he prepared to fuck Massimo on the ground. He entered Massimo, after preparing him briefly, with his tongue.

Massimo begged Philippe-Auguste for the cock and he obliged, entering him quickly, fucking him hard.

Massimo's knees pushed back to his chest.

Caprice came as she watched Philippe-Auguste fucking the man she loved with relentless, assured strokes.

She watched Massimo's head turn, his neck in readiness for the sensual taking.

"My God," Marcello said, rising from beneath his woman's heavy gown. "He's already one of us."

"Oh yes," Philippe-Auguste purred. "He's been mine for months. Do you want my cock?" he asked Massimo.

"Yes, yes," Massimo almost wept with delirium. "You've made me wait so long."

Marcello took Caprice by the hand and led her to their room as Philippe-Auguste came inside Massimo's wanting ass.

"I think he would like to come with your mouth on him," Philippe-Auguste told her. She ran down the stairs, claiming the cock she adored and Massimo convulsed in her throat as Philippe-Auguste stroked her head.

"How beautiful you are, both of you."

All four of them returned to the bedroom upstairs and Caprice marveled at the banquet of pleasure, the non-stop parade of peaks and more peaks. At one point, she had Philippe-Auguste's cock inside her grasping pussy, Massimo's tongue on her ass and Marcello feeding her his cock.

She found the pleasure so intense she thought she was drowning. When they fell asleep with arms and legs entangled, she heard a distant clanging of bells and recognized them as being the gravedigger's bells. Something tore at her chest. She raised herself from the fog of sleep, and naked, moved toward the window.

Across the square, she saw the doctor and the gravedigger at the little apartment Geovanna lived

in over the stables of Baldovino's home. The hawk-like mask turned and stared at her, unblinking. She saw the women in their night attire, holding lit candles high and knew in that moment that the red spots she'd seen on Geovanna had not been a rash.

Her best and only female friend had the plague.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Massimo stood in the doorway and watched as Caprice painted. Her back was ramrod straight, her posture closed and standoffish. A clear message of *Don't come near me. Don't try to make me feel better. Don't try to offer me comfort, because there is none to be had.*

He still couldn't believe that she was that upset over Geovanna, of all people. In his opinion, the simpering, dense female had always been an annoying distraction, something else to divert Caprice's attention away from where it should be—on him.

Walking slowly up to her, he placed a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you come back to bed with me? The sun will rise soon and I want to enjoy you in my arms during our day sleep."

"Not until I'm finished with this painting," she replied.

Although her voice was as smooth and husky as ever, he could tell by the furrow of her brow

that she had her mind made up and no amount of argument would sway her. Stubborn woman. It was a lucky thing he loved her so or he could quickly become sick of that fault.

With a heavy sigh, he flopped into a nearby tapestry chair and gave the easel a jaded glance. The painting was of Geovanna. She was nude and on her side with an almost heavenly glow around her. Massimo fought to keep his expression blank of any disgust. He'd never understood what Geovanna's benefactor saw in her. With her long face and large nose, she almost resembled a horse.

Of course, he would never tell Caprice that. No, she was fiercely protective of the other woman and the last thing he wanted was to be on Caprice's bad side.

"Very beautiful work." He laid on the charm. Anything to get Caprice back into bed before the other two came back from feeding. It had been too long since he'd had her sweet pussy all to himself.

"Thank you," Caprice murmured as she put down her brush and lifted paint-stained fingers to touch the picture's face. "I should go to her."

"You know you can't do that," Massimo sat up straight with a start, alarm racing through his body. "She's been taken to *Isola del Lazzaretto Nuovo* and no one is allowed there for fear of spreading the infection further."

"Please, Massimo." Her beautiful full lips

curved up into a smile although it never reached her sad eyes. "It's not like I can catch it. You heard Philippe-Auguste, vampires are immune to all human ailments."

"You still can't go. If you were to get caught there, then there will be all kinds of problems." He rubbed his thumb along his bottom lip as he thought of a good way to get her to see his side. "You know the rumors that are going around about how it's vampires who are making the victims sick. The last thing any of us needs is for you to be caught lurking around the hospital. It will raise too many questions."

"Massimo!" She twisted in her seat so she could direct all her fury on him.

He hated how he squirmed under that gaze. "It's true though, love." He got back up, walked over to her and brushed a lock of her soft hair off her shoulder. "I care for Geovanna, too, but it won't do anybody good if you go and get yourself killed."

"She is my friend and like a sister to me." Her chin tilted up defiantly. "If it were me, she would be there."

*Not good, it would seem nothing is going to dissuade her. I'll just have to take care of this matter, once and for all.* "Would you be satisfied if I went to see her instead?" he asked, being very careful to sound as if the idea had just popped into his head.



"You would do that?" She put her hand over his and beamed up at him.

How he loved that smile, so much so that he would kill to see it back on her face permanently. "I love you and would do anything for you."

Caprice quickly replaced her smile with a concerned frown. "But what if they catch you there? It would be just as bad for you as it would for me."

"Don't worry about me." He brought her fingers to his lips and brushed a kiss along her knuckles. "I've been vampire longer than you and I know how to hide myself from any man I come across. They won't even know I was ever there."

"You promise to be careful?"

The bleak look was gone from her eyes and it made him feel warm all over to know that he was the one putting the spark back in her. "Have faith in me."

"You know I do."

Even as she made that assurance, he doubted her. Many a time she and Marcello had exchanged a covert glance when Massimo had returned home, yet again empty pocketed after a night of gaming. It was as if the others expected him to fail. It angered him, but at the same time, he knew they would someday see things his way. Soon, they would realize how powerful and smart he was and so would Philippe-Auguste. "She may be

dead already," he warned.

"She may be alive and well," Caprice countered. "Some people live after being infected. Do you think if she is still alive and maybe sick that we could...what I mean could you..." She trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid, but the implication was there loud as a bell.

"You want me to turn her?" In truth, he wasn't overly surprised at her request. Although he wasn't as skilled as Philippe-Auguste at reading minds yet, Massimo was getting better and he'd been able to hear that question whispered in Caprice's thoughts all day.

"Do you think it's possible?" She turned to stare again at the damnable painting.

"I could try for you," he lied. He'd just as soon turn a horse. As far as he was concerned, this little family of theirs was already getting too crowded and complicated. However, he could never tell the others that because then they might decide he was the one who needed to go and Massimo was enjoying the sex too much to leave. Besides, he did love them in his own way.

Bringing her fingers to his mouth again, he kissed the soft flesh. She smelled of those paints she used and he'd long grown to enjoy that scent because it reminded him of her and their encounters in bed. *Ah, the things those fingers could do to a cock. That is where she is the true artist.*

"I can't do anything until tomorrow, however... not with the sun coming up so soon. Come to bed with me." It wasn't a question, but rather a command. He was in control at least for now and he wanted—no, he needed her to acknowledge that. A quick intake of her breath and the blossoming scent of her arousal told him she caught on and was more than willing to yield to him.

"That would be nice," she purred looking up at him from under her dark lashes.

Massimo yanked her up to her feet by the hand and pulled her into a hard possessive kiss. He wasn't brutal, yet he wasn't gentle either. Each stroke, each caress, each nip led to one of complete dominance. When her fangs dropped in the heat of her passion, his cock jumped in response. He knew the others would be coming back, and while he truly did enjoy Philippe-Auguste fucking him, Massimo wanted the fun of using Caprice's willing body for a while, too.

The next evening, as soon as the sun set, Massimo slipped out of the warm bed he shared with the others and stole from the house. When Marcello and Philippe-Auguste awoke, they would assume he'd gone to the gambling hall again. Caprice would know the truth, but Massimo trusted she would keep quiet since he

was going to check on her friend.

The entire boat ride out there, he spoke little to the driver, not wanting to draw attention to himself. Surprisingly, the extra coin he pressed in the man's hand helped to clear his memory as well. It was a good thing Caprice had made sure he had enough money before he left, Massimo mused. They were still several yards from the island when the smell hit him. Death, decay, burning flesh and the rotted stench of the sickness hung in the air like a thick, cloying blanket—made even worse thanks to his heightened vampire senses.

While this place had once been used to quarantine incoming ships and their crew, it was now overrun with plague victims. Straining his eyes, Massimo was able to make out the shapes of the wooden huts that dotted the landscape along with the larger buildings. The huts were used to house the ill and he'd heard that they could hold over a half dozen victims at the same time. He certainly hoped the dear, horsey Geovanna had a bit more privacy than that.

She should if her benefactor still cared for her, one would think he would pay for that privilege. Once he left the boat, he started to slip around the huts on the island, making sure to keep to the shadows, but also careful not to look too suspicious at the same time. One time a doctor

looked in Massimo's direction. On pure instinct, Massimo slipped into the man's mind and made him believe he'd seen nothing at all.

A slow smile spread out over Massimo's face. That had been a lot easier than he expected. Human's minds were much more open than a vampire's. Using his newfound skill, he skipped across the minds of the nearby men and woman, picking up random thoughts and images until he had the location of Geovanna. Once he was sure of where she was, he paused to reflect. *So it would appear the courtesan isn't so favored after all.*

Finding the one hut amongst the others took him a few more minutes, but he soon had it and pushed open the door. If he'd thought the smell had been bad before, it was nothing compared to the inside of these squalid conditions. Bringing his handkerchief to his nose, he wished he'd thought to bring along some herbs.

A few other females were lying there, but they were either already dead or close enough for him not to worry about them. He found Geovanna against the wall on a sweat-stained pallet. Crossing the rough floor, he made sure not to step in the puddles of various fluids as he made his way to the courtesan. He stood and looked down in disgust at her.

Lanky, filth-coated hair covered her bloated face and *lenticulae* covered her body. The very

spots marking the flesh she had worked so hard to keep flawless for her lover. Her tongue darted out past her dry, chapped lips, perhaps looking for a drink of water. As far as Massimo could see, that would be a useless request since there wasn't any available. Opening her swollen eyes, she peered up at him.

"Marcello?" she croaked.

"No, it's Massimo." He still didn't offer her a touch of comfort, but kept towering over her.

"Massimo?"

She sounded confused, not that he could really blame her. If anyone had to pick the twin willing to go into an island infested with disease just to check up on a friend, all bets would have gone for Marcello.

His brother had always been too kind for his own good. Just like Caprice. Which is why Massimo had to look out for them, protect them. The last thing he wanted was for them to be taken away from him because they had trusted the wrong person or risked everything just to help another. Someday, when they saw the truth of how things really worked, they would thank him for everything he'd done for them.

"Why are you here?" she asked and he didn't miss the hint of fear in her voice now. Geovanna had always been as smart as she had been homely so she no doubt could tell, by his demeanor, this

visit wasn't to exchange *hello*.

"*Vampiro*," one of the half-dead creatures moaned from somewhere in the room.

Geovanna's eyes grew wide. "No."

Even as she shook her head in denial, Massimo could smell her fear spike and take hold. He inhaled deeply. Even with the overlying stench of the hut, terror had a titillating aroma. One could get addicted to it.

"She is delirious," Geovanna explained away the creature's accusation, even though they both knew she was only trying to convince herself of that. "Right?"

Massimo let his fangs fall into place before he smiled wide. Even in the dim light, there was no way she could miss them.

Letting out a rattling scream of horror, she tried to scoot away but the wall stopped her retreat. "You can't kill me." She took in a wet, wheezy breath, her diseased lungs starting to fail. "I'm your friend."

"No, you were Caprice's friend. To me, you were always an annoyance."

"Why?" Geovanna shook her head. "I'm all ready dying."

"True," Massimo conceded, "but until you are dead, Caprice will worry and want to come to your aid. I can't allow that to happen. The only way she will truly let go is if you are no longer

around.”

Massimo yearned to give into his primal vampire urges and sink his fangs into her tender flesh. He wanted to know how it would feel to have it give under his teeth as the hot blood poured down his throat. Then he took another look at the *lenticulae* covering her and changed his mind. There was not enough wine in the world to make him drunk enough to touch that.

Taking out a dagger that he had brought along just for this purpose, and without giving himself time to dwell on what he was doing, he knelt and slashed her throat. The instant her blood flowed free, he could feel the vampire side of him come out and demand control. The crimson river seemed to be calling to him and he forgot that he was in the pit. He even forgot that death surrounded him until he brought his blood stained fingers to his mouth and sucked.

Massimo stomach painfully clenched at the taste. It tasted like rotted meat that one left out to stew in the sun to make it even more fetid. Pulling back, he twisted his face to the side and heaved. Nothing came up, making the retching all the more painful. It would seem that blood from plague victims did not agree with vampires at all. If only all the officials who blamed vampires for being the cause of the plague knew this.

Gathering his wits, he wiped his mouth with



the back of his hand and looked over at Geovanna. Her eyes were open and glassy, the slash mark on her neck wide and vicious. Even though her cause of death was obviously not from the plague, Massimo doubted that anyone would care enough to look into it. As far as the officials were concerned, Geovanna was just another penniless burden on their already overworked system. Getting up, he gave her a mock bow before he turned to leave.

Once outside, Massimo took in deep cleansing breaths. Despite the fact there was an open mass grave not too far away, the air was still better than inside the hut. Although the urge to stay and linger over his first kill was strong, Massimo knew he had to leave before someone spotted him, other than a delirious half-dead woman.

As he rode the boat back to Venice, Massimo could not help but constantly relive the kill in his mind. How it felt to have Geovanna's life force pour over his hands. For that one brief moment, he had been a god. He let out a low chuckle and it must have sounded dangerous because the ferryman swallowed hard and edged further back in the boat.

Again, the pungent smell of fear hit his nostrils and Massimo found that the more he smelled it, the better it got.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Massimo!” Marcello dropped the glass he’d been holding, wine spilling all over the expensive carpet of the gambling parlor. He hardly noticed, too caught up in the sudden knowledge that his twin was in danger.

Breath caught in his throat, he looked across the room and made eye contact with Philippe-Auguste. The Frenchman had a concerned look about him, too, showing he felt the same threat to Massimo. Nodding his head, his gray hair catching the light, he motioned for Marcello to meet him outside.

“Please, excuse me,” he murmured to the table as he slid out of his seat.

Meeting Philippe-Auguste at the door, the two vampires didn’t say a word until they were out on the street and out of hearing distance.

“Massimo is in trouble,” Marcello stated without preamble.

“It’s Thais. I can sense his presence.” Philippe-

Auguste lifted his face into the air almost as if the moon would hold his answer.

"How can you feel him and I can't?" Marcello sniffed the air, but didn't find anything new. "I can tell Massimo is in danger, but that is not new. I've been able to do that since we were born."

"Yes, that special connection that all twins have." Philippe-Auguste gave a bitter chuckle. "I guess I have something similar to Thais, although we are not related by blood, his still flows inside me."

"I'm sorry." Marcello felt dense, but he wasn't getting what the man was alluding to. "I don't understand?"

"Thais was my sire. He turned me fifty years ago when I still lived in France." He smiled. "Believe it or not, I wasn't much older than you at the time. I was a temperamental and spoiled son of a noble man and I lived for drink and sex. Thais didn't have to work hard to seduce me, and before I knew it, he'd changed me and I was under his control. Come, we must find Massimo quickly. I can tell you more of my past later when we are all safe and at home."

They took off running through the streets of Venice. With each step, the anxiety for Massimo grew. The fangs in Marcello's mouth grew long in anticipation of a battle. A low growl rumbled deep in his throat at the thought of anyone harming his

twin. But with every corner they turned, they found no sign of either Massimo or Thais. After an hour, Marcello and Philippe-Auguste paused. Although they had been running at top speed the entire time, neither one was breathing hard.

"Where could they be?" Marcello turned a full circle, scanning the street, before he ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

"I don't like this," Philippe-Auguste mused. "First Massimo wasn't at the gambling hall like we anticipated and now he's missing. I fear Thais lured him out somehow and he is stalking him."

"Can you sense if Thais is near?" Panic was making Marcello feel a blind rage and he knew he needed to get a hold of his emotions or he would be no good to any of them. Taking several deep breaths, he tried to focus his mind on the task rather than on the despair ripping him apart.

"I think Thais is somehow blocking me." Philippe-Auguste frowned.

"He can do that?"

"I've never known a vampire to have that skill before, but Thai is old. He may be one of the oldest of our kind. He has powers that most of us only dream of."

*Great, not only is a dangerous vampire tracking Massimo, but it is one with great power, too. Can this get any better?*

"Let's run again," Philippe-Auguste suggested

before he put a comforting hand on Marcello's shoulder. "We won't stop looking until we find him. I promise you."

\* \* \* \*

Massimo walked down the darkened streets of the city. There were a few stragglers here and there and, off in the distance, he could hear the twinkle of the bells. Believed to clean the air of the plague, they had been an almost constant sound for far too long.

Even though he knew he should feel guilt or sadness over Geovanna, he found he didn't. All that remained was that same almost giddy feeling he'd experienced as he felt her take her last breath. It was the same thrill he used to get at the gambling table or when he'd made a new conquest in bed.

He was like the bear from earlier, except he wasn't in chains or hindered in any way. No, he was a hunter out in the wild and the whole city could be his prey. He smiled at the thought until he recalled the lecture Philippe-Auguste had given him the night he'd turned Massimo.

*"You can hunt and drink their blood, but you must never kill," the Frenchman had warned between heated kisses. They had been both nude, sated from sex and*

holding each other in the large bed at Philippe-Auguste's sprawling estate.

"I don't think you have to worry about that." Massimo closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of the man's hard body pressed against him. He ached all over, but it was a pleasant ache.

"That's just it, Massimo." Philippe-Auguste went up on one elbow and gazed down at Massimo. "You are no longer human and you will have urges – desires that could be terrifying if you were to give into them."

"I could never harm anyone," Massimo protested with a nervous chuckle, even as he ran his tongue over one of his new, sharp fangs.

"You can and you will unless you learn to fight that side of your new vampire self. It will be a losing battle unless you learn to face that you can become a monster. I have given you immortality, great strength and the ability to feel things as never before. However, I have also cursed you with new dark urges that you must not succumb to."

"What will happen if I do?" Massimo asked, fear clawing at his insides. Him a monster?

"Then other vampires will hunt you down and kill you. We can't allow humans to know that we truly exist. Just look at all the witches that were burned at the stakes." He leaned down for another kiss, his long hair, brushing against Massimo's face before he pulled back and smiled. "Besides, my Italian lover, we are not evil."

Now as Massimo stood under the moon,

Geovanna's blood on him, he couldn't help but wonder if he was becoming the monster Philippe-Auguste had talked about in his warnings. A shiver ran through him as he imagined how it would be to see the looks of disappointment in Caprice's and Marcello's faces if they knew what he'd done tonight. "No, as good as it felt tonight there can never be another time," he whispered.

"But why not?" a voice asked from behind him. "After all, it's our destiny to rule over our chattel."

Whipping out the dagger, Massimo spun around and got ready to defend himself. A tall, blond man stepped out of the shadows and smiled at him. With high-arched cheekbones, sensual lips and a muscular build, he was attractive, especially when he smiled. A soft come-to-bed-and-fuck-me-now look came over the man's gaze and Massimo was stunned to feel his cock answering.

"Massimo, I have been longing to meet you," the man crooned. He eyed the blade and cocked a brow. "I mean you no harm, I assure you."

"Who are you and how do you know my name?" Massimo was surprised when the question came out in a low guttural growl.

"You know who I am."

"Thais," Massimo hissed as he gripped the hilt of his weapon so tightly his knuckles popped.

"I knew you were smarter than the others give you credit for." Thais smiled wider, showing off

his fangs. They were longer than any others that Massimo had seen before.

"You were the one who attacked Marcello and almost killed him. I should gut you right now and let you bleed out on the streets!" Massimo raged.

"Ah, yes. You're getting quite good with that blade, aren't you?" Thais's gaze was too knowing for Massimo's comfort.

"You've been following me the whole night, haven't you?" he asked as apprehension crawled up his spine.

"Yes, I was." The vampire took a couple of steps closer. "I must say I was most impressed with the way you handled that wretched female. You did her a favor really. The plague would have tormented her for days before she finally died. What you did for her was quick and with mercy."

"It was," Massimo agreed, willing to let Thais think the kill was an act of kindness.

"But that's not why you slit the courtesan's throat, was it? You did it because you didn't want Caprice distracted by anyone but you."

Massimo opened his mouth.

Thais cut him off, "Don't even try to deny it. I can read the truth in your mind. Don't worry, I won't go and tell the others your secret. In fact, I'm impressed with you for doing it."

"You are?" Massimo felt as if he'd been reduced to a blathering idiot with all the questions he was



asking, but the whole situation was so surreal. It was almost as if he was having a dream and he would wake up to find himself in the safety of Philippe-Auguste's arms.

"Most vampires aren't weak and afraid like Philippe-Auguste. We know that humans have their place and it's under us."

"You're just saying that so I will betray him," Massimo accused, seeing right through the man's lies.

"Maybe, maybe not." Thais glided a bit closer, within striking distance now. "Let me ask you a question though. If Philippe-Auguste were to have to pick you or Marcello, who do you think would win?"

"Me, of course. I was the first one he sought out. The first he turned."

"Massimo, let's not hide from the truth here." Thais reached out and caressed his cheek, and despite himself, Massimo shivered at the heated contact. "We both know that Philippe-Auguste has a very soft spot for your twin. The only reason he turned *you* was to get closer to Marcello. It was he and Caprice that he wanted all along, not you."

"Not true, we all love each other," Massimo spat, but there was a dark spot of doubt seeding in his heart.

"You forget, I can see into your mind." Thais continued to caress his face, before allowing his

fingers to linger on Massimo's pulse line.

Massimo sucked in a breath as his cock grew hard. Disgust for himself made his stomach clench. Thais was the one who tried to kill Marcello and Caprice and yet he was sexually attracted to him. Maybe he truly was the monster that Philippe-Auguste spoke of.

"Not a monster, just a god," Thais leaned in to whisper, his hot breath fanning against the side of Massimo's face. "Leave the others and come with me." He cupped Massimo's straining cock. "I can help you become so much more."

It was tempting, so tempting, but then he remembered Caprice's warm eyes, his brother's loving smile and the protective way Philippe-Auguste always held them. Giving a roar that sounded more animal than human, Massimo swung the dagger around to slash at the vampire.

With a smooth laugh, Thais moved so quickly to the side that Massimo didn't even see him move. One moment he was in front of him, the next, he was standing beside him. There was a pricking at his neck and it took him a couple of heartbeats to realize the vampire had pulled out a dagger of his own and pressed it against Massimo's throat.

"I could kill you right now." Thais pressed the blade in even deeper to prove his point. "Just because you're immortal doesn't mean you won't

die if I cut off your head. I could do that, you know. Cut off your pretty skull and leave it on a pike for Philippe-Auguste to find."

"Please," Massimo whispered as he felt a thin trickle of blood start to come down from his neck.

"I won't do that though, and you want to know why?"

"W...w...why?" Massimo hated that his voice trembled so, reducing him to a crying female.

"Because we are alike, you and I." Thais used his free hand to swipe up some of Massimo's blood. Bringing his wet fingers to his mouth, he licked them clean. "Sooner or later, you will see how right I was tonight and then you will come looking for me."

"I'll never be with you." Massimo was proud that this time his words came out much stronger.

"Your words say one thing, but your blood and hard cock tell me another." Thais smiled, managing to look both sensual and sinister at the same time. "You and your sweet ass belong to me, Massimo, you just aren't ready to realize it yet."

With that final stunning declaration, Thais turned and walked away. The final insult being that he seemed to have no care that he was giving Massimo his back, as if he was no threat.

Massimo snorted as he held a hand up to his bleeding throat. Given the very humiliating encounter, he wasn't a threat to the vampire. Thais

had all but spanked him.

"Massimo! There you are. We've been looking for you, forever."

Massimo closed his eyes and groaned as he saw his twin approach, Philippe-Auguste not far behind. Perfect, just what he needed to end this perfect mess of a night. He was going to have to scramble fast to come up with some excuses. Looking down at his bloodstained clothes, he amended that to having to think *really* fast.

"You're hurt." Marcello's eyes grew wide with concern as he came up to stand in front of Massimo.

"Just a scratch, nothing more," Massimo assured, trying to make the situation as light as possible.

"It was Thais, wasn't it?" Philippe-Auguste asked, his eyes narrowing as he looked at the wound.

"Yes, he was here," Massimo admitted. There was no sense in denying that much since Philippe-Auguste already seemed to know that much. "We fought and he left." He deliberately left out the damning words the vampire had flung out.

"Let's get back home to Caprice," Philippe-Auguste ordered. "We can discuss what happened there. The sun will rise soon."

Massimo nodded his head, only too happy to put off the interrogation for as long as possible.

The three vampires took off, running through the streets of Venice at a breathtaking speed. All too soon, they were back at Caprice's house. As soon as they walked in, she came running to the door.

"You were all gone so long, I was beginning to worry," she admonished with a smile. It faded as she looked at them. "You are all upset. Why?"

"Thais," Marcello supplied grimly. "He attacked Massimo."

"Are you okay?" she gasped.

"I'm fine." Massimo brushed past her and sat in a chair.

"The blood that is on you... it's not all yours," Philippe-Auguste observed in a dark voice.

"No, it's not." Massimo decided to go with the story he concocted on the run home. "It's Geovanna's. She's dead, by Thais's hand."

"Not Geovanna," Caprice cried as she sank down into a seat and started to sob.

"I'm sorry. I tried to stop him, but I was too late."

"Why would he want to kill Geovanna?" Philippe-Auguste continued to study Massimo. "She was harmless to him and he couldn't drink her blood since she had the plague."

*Now he tells me.* Massimo groused internally. *It would have been nice to know that kernel of information before I took a sip.* "He told me it was because he wanted to hurt Caprice since she

belongs to you," Massimo said.

Caprice began to cry in earnest. Philippe-August and Marcello ran to her side, trying to comfort her.

Massimo stayed where he was, too busy reliving the kill in his head to pay them any mind. It had felt so good and he'd managed to get away with it, too. The others had believed his lies.

What was to stop him from enjoying it again? Surely one or two humans wouldn't hurt? Hiding his smile behind his fist, he ran his tongue over his fangs in anticipation.

## CHAPTER TEN

Caprice stood in front of the painting. The late afternoon sun slipped into the lagoon, casting a pearly, orange glow into the room of the great artist's salon. He lit candle sconces on either side of the painting. All her hopes and dreams rested on what happened next. She was aware of Philippe-Auguste watching her, his calm presence washing over her from the chair where he sat, sipping wine.

She stepped back and blew out a breath.

"Well?" the old man's voice was a bark, but his expression was not unkind.

"Maestro, the painting is magnificent." She stared at it a moment longer, the haunting image of a man hanging upside down, flayed, as other men gathered around him. The rich depth of detail and exquisite use of color in the enormous oil on canvas stunned her.

Titian, the greatest painter who ever lived in Venice, no, the whole of Italy, awaited her opinion

of *The Flaying of Marsyus*. Just completed, this two-year labor of love was destined for a home in an obscure foreign city. Titian, still striking and strong in his eighty-fifth year of life, waited for more. His wrinkled skin and gray hair belied the brilliant gleam of his piercing, dark brown eyes. He still saw everything.

Her former art teacher, Eduoard, once told her, *The Maestro sees everything. He is always painting, always seeing the light, the color in all things. He paints in his head. It is a glorious gift.*

It had been Philippe-Auguste who finally introduced her to Titian who had not been surprised to discover the brilliant new artist Capriccio's true identity. Now, he sought to test Caprice's desire to be a serious artist. She wondered briefly if she were really up to the challenge.

She stumbled over her words. "Marsyus is being skinned alive in the center of the painting."

"Yes, yes," the old man was testy now. "Why was he flayed?"

"He challenged the god Apollo in a flute-playing contest." She paused. "The contest rules stated the winner could do whatever he pleased with the loser. Apollo chose to flay him."

"Let's move to the peripheral characters, shall we?"

She inclined her head. So far, so good. She



remembered all her lessons. "The man on the left is, I believe, King Midas. He is wearing the ears of an ass because he prefers Marsysus's flute playing to that of Apollo. This was his punishment." She turned and smiled at the old master. "Maestro, this is a self portrait, is it not?"

Titian beamed, but he did not look well. His skin was pallid, but then he was still churning out paintings in his relentless way, as if he were a young man in his prime. "Very good, young Caprice. What else do you notice?"

"Marsyus is a satyr. He has the torso of a man, the lower body of a goat." She bit her lip. "He seems to accept his fate."

"What of the violinist?"

"I believe that is Apollo." *Oh, that I were home in bed with Philippe-Auguste!*

She caught his chuckle in her mind. She was still enthralled over his ability to read her and send her messages. She wished she could read him as well and hoped in time she would. She also hoped he received her call for sexual fulfillment loud and clear. Sensual desire swamped her reason for a moment. "Apollo is said to have regretted his violent treatment of Marsyus and abandoned the flute for a time." She tried not to think about handling Philippe-Auguste's beautiful shaft in her warm hands.

"What about the flayer himself?" Titian asked.

She was glad he didn't ask about the other characters. She knew Saint Sebastian, who frequently popped up in the great artist's recent works was there for a reason, but could not fathom why.

She studied the image for a moment. "The flayer is wearing a cap that some say is the symbol of a freed slave. It also represents a foreigner. It looks very much like the doge's cape here in Venice." Her thoughts raced. "You are letting the people who receive this painting know that it is the work of a Venetian artist. No, I should say, the greatest Venetian artist of all time."

Titian accepted the compliment. "I won't ask you about Saint Sebastian. Only somebody very stupid would not know why he is in the picture."

She caught Philippe-Auguste's wicked grin and said nothing.

Titian threw back the contents of his crystal wine goblet. "I am going to give Capriccio a commission. I am old and tired and I believe this work will enhance his reputation."

"Really?" Caprice felt elation and fear mingling within her.

"You have learned very well."

"Thank you, Maestro."

"You will undertake the portrait of the town magistrate. His name is Baldovino. I accepted the commission, but find I am unable to complete it in

the amount of time he has allotted."

Caprice opened and shut her mouth. She hated Baldovino. He was the one who allowed Geovanna to go away to die, abandoned and alone. She could not be foolish however. She had fought for the privilege of painting, earning her place as a working artist on the periphery of Titian's great studio *La Senseria*.

"He has paid me eight crowns and I will give you five."

She almost gasped at the huge sum of money. Titian held out his hand and her fingers closed over the coins. Her fate was set.

"He likes to pose early in the morning, as soon as the sun rises. He will give you two hours per day for nine days."

*Nine days!* She nodded, but felt miserable. She was useless at sunrise. How could she do her best work? This was the first time she was painting an actual commissioner. Normally they asked for a certain style of portrait and Geovanna or Marcello posed for her.

*You will have to paint from memory and use a double as you usually do,* Philippe-Auguste telepathed to her. *Please don't worry. We will get through this.*

She nodded. She liked the sound of that *we*. She took hold of the vellum contract bound with cord and finished with Titian's personal wax seal. She

could hardly believe her ears when the Matestro wished her good luck.

*Believe it*, Philippe-Auguste's thoughts flew into her mind. *You are talented. You are the queen of Venetian art.*

"You will bring the painting to me, unsigned, and I will decide if it is good enough for him." Titian paused. "Or if indeed, he is worthy of an original Capriccio."

She stared at him.

"I knew Geovanna. Her death was...regrettable."

Caprice closed the gap between her and Titian. She kissed her beloved Maestro's hand, then impulsively pressed her lips to the other. He patted her head and shooed her away like an errant chicken. Philippe-Auguste helped her out of the studio.

"Those stupid shoes," he murmured. "These are even more ridiculous than the rest. You must never wear them again, promise me."

Since Thais had become a threat and Massimo increasingly absent, Marcello and Philippe-Auguste had insisted she wear lower *chopines* in case they needed to run. She had insisted on wearing her very best, eighteen-inch heels for her meeting with the great Maestro, but now found herself hobbling home.

The pink satin and velvet shoes had been her

joy and now she knew she must leave them in the sprawling dressing room where she sometimes wore them, just for the reminder that she owned them and had bought them with her own money.

It was dusk when they arrived and out of breath, she removed her shoes at the bottom of the stairs and raced Philippe-Auguste to the top. She ran to the bedroom and threw herself on the bed. He covered her body with his. She could feel her lover's hard erection straining against her, even through her clothes.

They stared at each other. "I am so proud of my woman," he whispered.

"Show me how proud you are." She still held her coins in one hand and her shoe straps in the other and let everything clatter to the floor.

He smiled and she enjoyed the spark of lust in his eyes.

He gazed down at her, resting on one elbow. He drew back and knelt on his haunches. His hands moved over her body, caressing the low décolletage and he kissed the rise of her womanly breasts as his hands slid her full skirts of cotton and silk up her thighs and she felt the cool rush of air as he detached the laces holding her sleeves to her chemise. He slid her silk and lace pantaloons down her thighs.

"Oh, Caprice." His gaze implored her to open

her legs and she held her breath as he kissed her mound and quickly buried his face between her hot thighs.

"I waited so long for this," he murmured, his tongue reaching into her musky depths.

She stroked his long gray hair, feeling his mouth suckling at her, one hand moving back to her breasts, the other underneath her ass. She felt him drawing her closer, his skin bristling against her tender inner thigh. Her legs opened further and she held his head close, feeling her orgasm closing in on her. His fingers grasped a nipple over the top of her bodice. She felt the jolts of pleasure as his tongue and lips latched onto her clitoris and sucked her. She felt her release engulf her like a wave of fire. Red and white flames seemed to ignite across her brain and she opened her eyes to find herself holding his head to her so tightly she was surprised Philippe-Auguste could even breathe. She let go of him and his wet lips came off her, a smirk of satisfaction invading his handsome face.

"I can't believe you two," said a voice from the doorway.

Philippe-Auguste laughed. "Our beautiful little artist just scored her first big commission, Marcello. I do believe she wants to celebrate."

"Well, in that case, who am I to interrupt the festivities?"

Marcello raced toward them, stripping fast. Philippe-Auguste's gaze fell on the prize between Marcello's thighs. "Get me ready for her," Marcello grunted and Philippe-Auguste lost no time absorbing his man's hardening shaft in his hot and hungry mouth.

"Where is Massimo?" Caprice wondered aloud.

Marcello chided, "How many men does it require to quench your lovely thirst?"

"Two will do...for now."

Philippe-Auguste released Marcello's manhood with a laugh. "Fuck Caprice first, then I demand equal time."

The woman the two men shared sat up and kissed the glistening penis that pointed right at her. She and Philippe-Auguste brought Marcello more pleasure, taking turns to suck him until he was ready to strike. Philippe-Auguste moved aside and watched in his possessive way as Marcello penetrated Caprice.

She moaned and the two men helped her remove all her clothing.

"Leave her pearls on...I love how they fall across her perfect breasts," Marcello rasped and Philippe-Auguste complied. The two men took a nipple each and she felt carnal hunger flare within her once again. Could it be possible to feel this way again so soon?

She gripped Marcello to her with her strong

thighs, Philippe-Auguste kissing them both. She felt her release swelling within her again, making her feel like she might stop breathing. Marcello seemed to know exactly what he was doing to her. He fucked her harder as Philippe-Auguste's fingers toyed with Marcello's ass.

"Don't keep the lady waiting," Philippe-Auguste purred. He moved to her throat, kissing and licking her. Caprice's thighs shot into the air as Marcello exploded inside her.

"Beautiful," Philippe-Auguste murmured. "Absolutely perfect." He pushed Marcello's body back from hers, his cock still throbbing, and Philippe-Auguste's mouth closed around the purple-red head.

"Oh," Marcello moaned. "Oh, Philippe-Auguste. I love you!"

\* \* \* \*

It was just before sunrise when Philippe-Auguste, wearing some of Marcello's clothing, his distinctive hair hidden under a cloth cap, accompanied Caprice to Baldovino's home across the square. They rang the bell and, for one brief moment, his hand strayed to Caprice's ass. She jumped. All night, he and Marcello had pleased her and each other. He tried not to think about Massimo. He had his hands full with his insatiable



man and woman already. Massimo was a stallion in the sheets, but an untamable wild thing out of them. But still, Philippe-Auguste hated to lose control of a lover, especially one as hungry for cock as Massimo was.

Caprice's throat still bled a little from where he had bitten her in his late-night feeding frenzy. She had covered it with a silk scarf and countless pearls, but he worried about her. He ran his tongue across the tiny fissures again and her pulse beat faster at his touch. He could smell rosemary and roses and realized they tumbled over the grape vines lining the cracked stone entrance to the magistrate's property.

"Kiss me," she hissed and he did, breaking away as the old wooden door in the archway opened and a maid in a thick woolen dress with a linen apron over it, peered out at them.

"Signore Capriccio?"

"Sí, and this is my assistant." Philippe-Auguste stepped forward with the paint box that was Caprice's most cherished possession, apart from her shoes.

The pair followed the maid past the open courtyard. The smell of horse manure was strong as they passed the stables and a large fountain and entered the main part of the house. Philippe-Auguste had seen many grand homes in his life and this was no exception. He glanced at Caprice

who watched it all with an artist's eye.

Baldovino was waiting for them in the library, pacing the room filled with antiquities as Caprice and Philippe-Auguste crossed the threshold into it.

A canvas waited on an easel and Philippe-Auguste glimpsed the instant happiness on Caprice's face. He read her thoughts easily. *Sail canvas. Oh, how wonderful.*

She stood in front of it now and stared at it. *I think a little more to the left.*

Philippe-Auguste picked up the heavy wooden easel and moved it until she nodded her head slightly.

"Where do you want me?" the portly magistrate asked.

*Not in my bed,* Philippe-Auguste thought to himself. He caught Caprice's stifled laughter. Good, she was starting to read him better now.

*Ask him to sit in his chair. Tell him it makes him look more regal.*

The magistrate seemed surprised when Philippe-Auguste asked him to do this.

"You won't tire as quickly and people will be drawn to your face," Philippe-Auguste lied. He picked up the first of the immaculate pieces of charcoal in the lined box and pretended to sketch his outline. Caprice sat beside him, her hands in her lap, studying the man in front of them. He

wore an ornate tunic of leather, splashes of color emerging from his chest and arms. His gilded chains of office sat on his chest. She took in every detail, and after about fifteen minutes, Baldovino excused himself.

She leaped into action, quickly extracting a piece of charcoal from her dress pocket. She sketched out the magistrate in fine detail, giving his eyes and cheekbones equal prominence to the weight of his gold chains. She had shaded in the contours of his face when the magistrate returned, announcing his arrival with a loud belch. She jumped back into her seat, her charcoal back in her pocket.

"I ordered some breakfast. I trust you will have some with me?"

"We would enjoy that." Philippe-Auguste's hand was back on the canvas, his unblinking gaze indicating he wanted his subject back in his seat.

Baldovino acquiesced without a saying a word. "Where have I seen you before?" he suddenly asked Caprice. "You look so familiar to me."

The servant who brought the morning meal saved her from answering. The spicy aroma of puffy fritters, made of milk and eggs, delighted Caprice and Philippe-Auguste.

"These are my favorite." Baldovino pointed to a golden platter loaded with what looked like fat, stuffed ravioli. "They are *caliscioni*. They are

prepared with almonds and rose water. These over here, are cinnamon cakes."

Philippe-Auguste took a spoon and ladled a couple of *caliscioni* onto his plate. He put one to his mouth and was certain he had died and gone to heaven.

"Good, huh?" Baldovino asked.

"Delicious." Philippe-Auguste savored the sweetness of the chubby pillows. Baldovino might have been an obnoxious swine, but he knew his food. Philippe-Auguste decided in that moment that Caprice must learn to cook. His new little family had become not only whores for one another, but for other people's food.

The magistrate poured them coffee and chose the opportunity to steal a look at the work. It was a frightening moment, for Caprice had been forced to work fast. He didn't seem upset though. In fact, he preened at the outline.

"Capriccio, you are as good as I have heard." After proclaiming the first morning to be a great success, he bid Philippe-Auguste and Caprice farewell until the following day.

"We must make sure he never gets another look at the work again until I've started painting," Caprice said as they hurried across the courtyard to reach home before sunlight burned too strongly. She carried her art box, Philippe-Auguste the covered canvas.

Across the courtyard from the opposite direction, a figure flittered past them. Philippe-Auguste stopped and stared. It was Massimo.

What was he doing here?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Marcello squirmed in the chair. "It's no use. I am stiff and I am bored. I demand relief."

"I'll give you relief." Philippe-Auguste grabbed his partner, lifting him to his feet and put himself in the chair. He snatched Marcello back onto his lap, his hand snaking around the younger man's cock.

Caprice laughed. "Should I paint this?"

Philippe-Auguste laughed. "I would pay you good money to portray Baldovino this way, pleasuring his husband."

Marcello moaned as Philippe-Auguste's mouth captured his, his hand gently stroking his shaft.

Caprice loved watching the scene of effortless seduction.

Marcello and Philippe-Auguste adored each other. Philippe-Auguste's head dropped and Marcello's shot back as his cock head slipped into his lover's mouth.

Caprice smiled as Philippe-Auguste's fingers

toyed with Marcello's ass and balls.

"Fuck me right here," Marcello moaned and Philippe-Auguste lifted him a little higher, plunging Marcello onto his raging erection. He licked Marcello's nipples, his hand still gripping the huge shaft that bounced along with their movements.

Caprice had never known passion like this. The three of them had become so close and Massimo now so remote. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do—watch, join in or apply more paint to her brush.

Her stomach rumbled. She was famished. Baldovino had sent them home with fruit and nuts. It was a delicious new fashion, fresh fruit. "I'm hungry," she announced, laying down her brush. She sped along to the hallway to the kitchen and found Massimo in it, biting into a fresh apricot. His expression brightened at her appearance. Their glances met in an instant, feverish spike and he pulled her to him. She gasped at the force of his hand encircling her wrist.

"Do you want me, Caprice?"

"Yes, yes."

He lifted her easily to the marble-topped butcher block and was pleased to see she was barelegged under her dress and smock.

"I see you are ready for me." His fingers rubbed

her slick, hardening nub. She felt him fumbling at his leggings as Marcello's impassioned cries drifted toward them.

"He's not the only member of this family getting what he deserves," Massimo announced and entered Caprice without the blink of an eye.

She hung onto him with her arms and legs, her joy turning to panic as he took her without his usual grace. He was all brute strength.

"Stop it," she gasped. "You're hurting me."

Within seconds, Philippe-Auguste was beside them, his body covered in a sheen of sweat, his eyes blazing in fury.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, trying to pull Massimo away from Caprice.

Massimo held her tighter as Caprice fought him off.

"You treat her with respect!" Philippe-Auguste thundered. "She is our wife."

"She's our whore!" Massimo sneered.

Philippe-Auguste pushed Massimo aside, but the younger man resisted. The two men lunged at one another, Caprice scrambling to get out of the way. Marcello was the one who hit his brother square on the chin, sending him reeling.

Caprice saw the three men circling and she grasped her chance. She ran to the center of the group and threw her arms around Massimo.



"I love you, Massimo."

Tears came down his face. "I love you, too. All of you." He straightened his clothes.

"Don't go," Philippe-Auguste said. "Please stay. We can talk."

"I can't." Massimo shivered. He kissed Caprice gently, his tears staining her lips and cheeks.

"Stay. Please, stay," she implored.

Something inside Massimo gave way and he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. He removed all her clothing and, under the watchful gazes of the two other men in their lives, prepared her properly with his tongue before entering her. His mouth moved to hers and she tasted herself on his tongue.

Marcello and Philippe-Auguste surrounded them, their hard cocks waiting for their turn. Massimo and Caprice sneaked kisses and licks at both until she was too far gone to think of anything but the man making love to her. She came so hard she saw stars and sheets of color fire in her brain. Her legs held him to her as he quaked inside her.

"Oh, Caprice." He fell on her, his heart racing in time with hers. She felt she had her lover back and laughed when Marcello brushed his brother aside to claim her, leaving Massimo to Philippe-Auguste's eager embrace. She watched the way Philippe-Auguste sucked Massimo's cock, licking

her juices from his thighs and belly.

"I love the taste of the two of you together," Philippe-Auguste said, reaching between her and Marcello to lick her pussy and his lover's cock.

It was a long, languid evening, the four of them naked, feeding each other sweet meats from the magistrate's kitchens, swapping kisses and gentle touches. It was a memory Caprice would always cherish. Massimo and Marcello being brothers never touched one another, except for playful slaps when one of them took too long with another lover.

From somewhere across the lagoon came the sound of the flute.

"I just realized something," Caprice said.

"What's that?" Philippe-Auguste asked as Massimo's head moved to his cock.

"I just realized why Saint Sebastian was in that painting, *The Flaying of Marsyus*."

Philippe-Auguste bit into a fresh fig, stroking Massimo's head against his belly. "And what have you decided?"

"He was a martyr...as was Marsyus. Titian is comparing their suffering. We all suffer at the whims of the gods."

"My clever, beautiful girl," Philippe-Auguste said, drawing her face to his for an impassioned kiss. For one inexplicable moment, she felt a tremor of terror spiral through her. Philippe-

Auguste's hot kisses banished all fear and doubt.

"I want a kiss," Marcello said and turned Philippe-Auguste's face to his own.

Caprice awoke at dawn and slipped out of bed. She was surprised to see Massimo gone. She checked the whole house. He had left and she wondered where he'd gone. She sat naked before her painting and dipped her fingers in the colors she'd dreamed of.

An hour later, she finished her piece and waited only for the Maestro's consent. Baldovino had driven her crazy with his insistence on seeing it. Well, he'd driven *Capriccio* crazy wanting to see the result.

"It is magnificent, my love," Philippe-Auguste's voice tickled her as he kissed her ear.

She wiped her fingers on the cloth in her hands. "Have I done him justice?"

"Justice?" He laughed. "You flatter him."

She signed it in ebony with her finger, as was her custom, and sat back to gaze at her results. She'd completed her work in nine days. Now she had to await the Maestro's decision.

"He will love it." Philippe-Auguste squeezed her shoulder. "This evening, we will take it to him."

Caprice nodded and allowed her lover to lure her back to the bedroom. Candlelight still

flickered in some house windows and she watched Philippe-Auguste draw the dark curtains against the encroaching sunlight. She snuggled between Marcello and Philippe-Auguste and fell into a swift, heavy sleep.

Her dreams disturbed her. She dreamed of fire and heard screaming. She heard Geovanna calling her name and cried in her sleep. She awoke with a jolt. It was not a dream. Her two men were gone and she was alone in the bed. She reached with shaky fingers to pull back the drapery. It was late afternoon...the day almost done. She felt dizzy, disoriented and struggled out of the bed.

She listened and heard Marcello and Philippe-Auguste arguing. Throwing on a chemise, she slipped into the living room. "What is it?" she asked when her two men stopped talking the second she opened the door.

"I have never believed in deceiving you. It is best you hear the truth." Philippe-Auguste moved across the room to her.

Over his shoulder, she glimpsed a fire raging in the distance. "What is that fire?" she asked.

"It is a new thing. They're burning victims' clothes. My love, there is no easy way of telling you this, but Titian has the plague. He has been removed from his studio."

She grappled with this news.

"No," she said. "It's impossible. This can't be."

Her thoughts flew in panic. "Titian? How cruel of God...where is he?"

"I don't know. We just tried to take the painting to his studio. It is boarded up. We went to his home. The doctor was there, Titian's wife is understandably hysterical."

"Does anybody else in his family have the plague?" she asked.

He shook his head. "His entire family has been checked. His wife said he spent all his time at *Las Sanseria*. His symptoms came on quickly and deteriorated within the last few days. He wouldn't even see her. He must have known he was very sick and wanted to protect her."

"We saw him..." She was dazed by the turn of events.

"My love, that was ten days ago. The symptoms come on quickly. In him, it appears the ravages tore through him, possibly due to his advanced age."

She glanced at the easel. "My painting. It's gone!"

"No, my love. We took it to Baldovino. He received it most gratefully." He hesitated. "He was thankful to learn that the Maestro never touched the canvas or even saw it."

"So everybody knows?" Neither man responded. Her heart felt heavy. Her beloved Geovanna and now, her cherished Maestro were

gone. She closed her eyes. "What of Massimo?"

"No sign of him."

"Is he gambling, do you think?"

"Oh, he's gambling." Philippe-Auguste's face looked grave. "But not with money. I believe he's with Thais. I hear there has been a rash of killings. I hope they are not behind it."

She shivered and Marcello came and put his arms around her.

"We're going to go out and look for him." Philippe-Auguste said. "I think we all should be together."

"Where will you look?"

He shrugged. "We'll start at the usual places. The *Ridotto*, I think." The two men kissed her and she watched them leave.

"We won't be long," Philippe-Auguste assured.

As she watched them running across the square, she felt more alone than she'd ever felt. She peered out across the horizon, past the lagoon, the acrid smell of smoke filling her nostrils. She returned to her room, poured water out of a jug into a basin and washed herself.

She slipped into fresh clothing, hesitating as she looked at her shoes. She loved her beautiful *chopines* and selected a pair of twelve-inch heels. They would not be going anywhere tonight. *Oh yes, the ones with the satin laces.* She sat on a low chair and laced them up her calves. The smell of

smoke was suddenly stronger, or was it her imagination?

Caprice heard the fire then and moved out of the bedroom. Her mouth fell open at the fire sweeping across the living room. Furniture, carpets, draperies, everything fell with an audible groan as her house was swallowed up in flames. She ran to the windows, aware too late that she was wearing her shoes. Below her on the streets, people were running. Baldovino's house was on fire and the entire line of houses had gone up in flames. She had nowhere to run—fire and smoke threatening to consume her.

The lagoon!

She raced to the other windows overlooking the lagoon. She had no time to remove her shoes. Why, oh why, had she laced them so tightly? She took one last look back at her home, at all the things she was leaving behind as she climbed out the window and prepared to jump.

"Philippe-Auguste!" she shouted to the wind and took flight, landing with a sickening thud into the thick, soupy lagoon.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Isola del Lazzaretto Nuovo. August 27, 1576*

Caprice found herself coming to, her hands, feet and face throbbing with pain. "Philippe-Auguste!" Her voice echoed in the silent church and she knew she was alone. She shifted around on the uncomfortable sofa. Suddenly, she was aware of another presence.

Marcello.

She cried when he ran to her, his beautiful face crumpled when he put his arms around her.

Philippe-Auguste stood beside him. "It is just the three of us. I have no idea where Massimo is."

She reached up her arms to him and he fell beside her, kissing her teary face.

"You should both go," she said. "I will slow you down."

"My sweet, silly girl. Don't you know we love you?" Philippe-Auguste asked and lifted her from the sofa. Her feet screamed in agony, but she held onto her lover's neck.



"I brought a boat. We must leave," Marcello said.

"Where are we going?"

"Home," Philippe-Auguste said, his voice firm.

"I am taking you both home with me to France."

"France?" Caprice stared up at him in wonderment.

"Vive la difference," Marcello said, making Philippe-Auguste chuckle. The three lovers stole across the hard ground to the waiting boat, the two men placed Caprice against the assortment of pillows and blankets prepared for her. In the distance, church bells rang and she could smell fire again.

"Sleep, precious angel," Philippe-Auguste urged her, kissing her furrowed brow. "You are safe now. And we are together."

Yes, they were together. She allowed herself to drift off, looking up at the dark clouds, her mind imagining the colors she would use to paint them. She would paint it all. She would remember it all, her beautiful, magical *quartetto*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

A. J. Llewellyn lives in California, but dreams of living in Hawaii. Frequent trips to all the islands, bags of Kona coffee in his fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep this writer refueled. A. J. loves male/male erotica, has a passion for all animals (especially the dog, the cat and the turtle). A. J. believes that love is a song best sung out loud.

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