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DANTE'S INFERNO

EVIE BYRNE

Dante's Inferno
by Evie Byrne

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

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Dedication

To Giustiniana

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Chapter One

Venice, 1750

Serena stared up at the stranger, fighting with herself. *All you have to do is say no, and he will go away.*

All night she had walked the crowded streets of Carnival, alone and invisible. Until now. Until this man singled her out among all the other women in the square, strutted up to her, executed the silliest bow she had ever seen and asked her to dance. Beneath his plain white mask, his crooked smile grew wider, beguiling her, daring her not to smile back.

You're a respectable widow. You can't go jigging in a public square with some Carnival rogue.

It was late. The dancing was turning less decent by the moment, yet she had not danced for such a long time. The fast beat of the drums and the howling brass tempted her as much as his smile. The air itself had a wild feel to it. And still he waited with his hand outstretched.

Then it is just as well that no one knows who I am.

She accepted his hand just as a new song began. His warm, strong fingers closed around hers and he drew her out into the center of the square to join the other dancers. Lines of torches flickered in the mist, casting an uncanny light over the scene, making the shabbiest costume seem real and turning reality into a dream.

Serena studied her partner as she took her place across from him and added a few scant facts to the little inventory of things she knew about him: he was a dark man, with a

pleasing mouth and chin, but he needed to shave. All she could see of his dress under his long, shabby cloak was a pair of equally worn boots. She reminded herself that it did not matter what she knew about him. It was only a dance.

The dance began and he whirled her around so fast that the lights blurred and stretched into ribbons before her eyes. Serena shrieked with delight and matched him step for step until, giddy and breathless, she had to hang on him just to keep her feet. She liked his laugh. She liked the way his arms felt around her.

When he bent to kiss her at the end of the dance, she should have turned her face away, but she did not. One kiss wouldn't hurt anything. And she was curious. No man had ever kissed her except her husband.

A paragon of polite restraint, the stranger brushed his lips against hers and withdrew. She smiled. See? Safe. Then he tilted his head the other direction and kissed her again, and she knew she was not safe at all.

Serena was used to quiet, husbandly pecks, but this man's wine-soaked kiss ripped the air from her lungs. Drunk on that wine, she melted under his hands and molded herself to the length of his body. Oh, how she needed this. This was what she was searching for, this was what made her wander the streets at night.

Throngs of revelers flowed around them, and no one noticed or cared that they kissed in the center of the square. When he led her away from the lights and noise of the dance into the black shadows, she did not protest and she no longer chided herself. Precisely because she was a widow, and tired

of being respectable, she gave herself to him. In the damp darkness of the narrow alley, he devoured her, his mouth hot on her throat, his beard burning her skin.

For a long time, Serena had wondered what just what passion meant, for she'd never felt it. Now she knew. The stranger's rough hands were remaking her body, teaching it to want. She inhaled gulps of the cold air over his shoulder and surrendered to the sensations overtaking her. His hands went to her bottom and pressed her tight against his hips, offering her his erection. Crude as the invitation was, her body responded. A liquid surge wet her thighs and with it came blinding urgency. She pulled his mouth down to hers. He caught her head between his large hands and answered her with a bruising kiss. All she wanted was him inside her. The need for him was an ache, a madness, an open wound.

But he did not take her that moment. Instead he plunged a hot, callused palm down the front of her stays and eased her breasts up until her nipples poked over the top edge of her bodice. These he rolled and pinched just enough to cross pain with pleasure. Serena cried out and her voice echoed off the narrow walls. She clawed at him, frantic with desire, until he muttered a curse, ripped open his breeches and took her against the wall. Hard.

Pinned against the wall, filled as never before, Serena struggled to find her bearings. She balanced on one foot—he held her other leg high, opening her to his powerful, grinding thrusts. Each one brought her up on the toe of her shoe and sometimes lifted her right off the ground. Desperate to find

any kind of purchase, she wrapped her legs around his hips and found she could ride him. That changed everything.

Never in seven years of marriage had she felt this slick sliding between man and woman. The exquisite friction between them threatened to kill her with pleasure. In the hazy margins of her consciousness, she was aware of her own insistent cries and his low, answering grunts as they spurred each other on like beasts. Suddenly, the man shouted, "*Dona Maria!*" and stopped thrusting. He stiffened, then relaxed with a sigh. This she did recognize from her marriage bed. It meant they were done. Once he caught his breath, he lowered her to the ground, where she swayed on unsteady legs—empty, wet and disoriented.

"That was very nice, *bella*," he said in his intriguing, deep voice. His white half-mask materialized before her eyes like a ghost. It had caught the light from the square. The rest of him was invisible. He pressed a purse of coins into her hand. "Can we meet again?"

"No." It was the first word she had spoken all night.

"Are you certain?" he asked, his fingers drifting along the line of her jaw. "I'd make it worth your while."

"No," she repeated in a whisper, and before she changed her mind, she walked out of the alley, fastening her cloak as she went.

From the mouth of the alley, Dante watched her return to the square, irked that she had refused him. No sane whore would turn down his company. He paid well, he was not a difficult customer and he did not smell. Speculatively he sniffed under his arm to make sure the last was true. He took

one step and then another, and before he knew what he was doing, he was following her.

The feathers in her tricorn bobbed and teased, one flirty red plume standing up among the white. The red feather made it easy for him track her despite many other long black cloaks and tricorns in the crowd. The *bautta* costume, consisting of a white mask, a tricorn hat, a hood and a dark cloak, was one of the most common forms of disguise for both men and women in Venice. She wore one, as did he. Despite her heavy cloak, she moved with a pleasing grace. He sped up as she made a sudden turn onto the packed Calle Botteghe, and though he was only a few steps behind, when he rounded the corner she was nowhere to be seen.

Dante turned in a slow circle, searching over the heads of the crowd, a stir of panic passing through him at the thought of losing her. When he spotted the red feather, he sent up thanks to Santa Lucia for sharp vision. She had ducked into the shelter of a doorway and was speaking to a beggar woman there. As he watched she handed his purse—his quite generous purse—over to the woman.

What, are you celebrating Lent early, my little whore? His eyebrows shot up. *Or are you not a whore at all?* That purse was meant to impress her and guarantee her future company, but it seemed she didn't need the money.

He had to set his speculation aside when she began to move again, slipping and dodging through the press of bodies. Too big to do that himself, he fought against the flow of the crowd. Though she moved fast, he kept his eye on the

red feather and was confident he would not lose her. That is, until the Devil got in his way.

Eight feet tall and black as coal, Satan stepped between Dante and his quarry. In his hand he held a long rope binding seven men in his wake: seven men costumed as the seven deadly sins, all staggering drunk. A knot of revelers traveled with the Devil and his companions, shouting advice on clean living to rowdy spectators who packed in from all sides to enjoy the show.

Cursing like a sailor—and doing it well because he was one—Dante pushed straight through the procession, shoving bodies aside in his haste. He made good progress until his foot caught on the rope connecting Pride to Lust and he tripped, falling on Envy, who shoved him away with an insult. Losing his temper, he shoved back. Fists were raised, Greed and Sloth menaced, and he remembered the girl. Jeers followed him as he ran away from the fight, flying in the direction he had last seen her moving, but he was too late. She was gone.

"Damn!" Too stubborn to give up, he searched another half hour, but with so many turns and junctions to choose from, so many doorways she could have slipped into, he knew he hadn't a hope of finding her again.

In the nearest tavern, a low, greasy place that reeked unaccountably of wet dogs, he bought a bottle of wine to ease his disappointment and a dish of spiced olives to help him forget her taste.

What if she was not a whore? She was no respectable woman, that was certain. A wife might stray, but she would

not go out on the streets looking for a quick tumble, and even the easiest girl required some courting. She might be an enterprising servant, available, but not professional. Yet if that were true, she would have kept the money. In the end, he decided that all evidence pointed to her being a bored mistress, a woman who did not prize virtue and who craved adventure more than she needed money.

Finding her all alone and so very amenable, he had just assumed she was a whore. During the dance, she hung on him. Her kiss afterward was an open invitation, and he did not have to cajole her into that alley. Once there, he could no longer think clearly enough to notice any evidence contrary to his assumption, though in retrospect there was plenty.

First there was that smile of hers. Watching her from a distance, the first thing he had noticed about her was how her full lips curled up at the corners in a closed-mouth, enigmatic smile. It was not a whore's bawdy grin. It was the expression of a woman contemplating mischief. He had asked her to dance just to see that smile again.

Already he knew it was a smile that would haunt him to his dying day. On his death bed, his grandchildren would ask if he had any regrets, and he'd say, "Yes, there was this girl once, who I thought was a whore..."

Looking back, he saw how she acted the whore in some ways and not others. She'd given herself to him without so much as a blink, but hadn't negotiated a price first. She rode him like a wildcat, but waited for him to unbutton his own breeches. None of that evidence meant anything particular on its own. Then he remembered her stays.

Dante buried his face in his palms, unable to believe his own stupidity. Her stays had laced at the back and were tied off high between her shoulder blades where she could not reach by herself. This "whore" of his could afford a maid.

Sucking on an olive, he imagined her spreading her legs day in and day out for the old coot who kept her. Inspired by the spirit of Carnival, or by the full moon, she had come out that night seeking pleasure. Instead she found Dante Valaresso, who mistook her for a whore and used her like one.

He spit the olive pit onto the floor.

You should just get back on your ship and stay there until Lent begins and it's safe for idiots to walk the streets.

The girl with the siren's smile hated him now, and for good reason. It was a miracle she had not thrown his money in his face and cursed him up and down for being a pig.

Despite the olives he could still taste her. He could still smell her too. She wore no perfume, but she smelled of something. Something as familiar and comforting as rain and weathered timber. He furrowed his brow. "She smells like my ship?"

"Shorry t'hear it, mate," said his neighbor. "Mine only shmells like onions."

Dante sighed and turned away. If he had not been blind with lust, she would be with him right now. In fact, they would be back in his cabin and he would have that mask off her. Better, he would have her clothes off her and she would be spread beneath him, moaning as she had in the alley. He

beat down this fantasy as fast as it formed, but not fast enough. Nonchalantly, he arranged his cloak over his lap.

Then and there he made a vow to himself. He would track her down, no matter what it cost. If she ran wild one night, she would run wild again, and if she did, he would find her and show her the meaning of pleasure.

Serena did not stop running until she reached her own door. The man had tried to follow her. She didn't see him—she felt him. A black wolf on her tail. The chase only added to the thrill of the evening. Like a rabbit, she ran in a wide circle, returning to her house only when she felt it was safe. She paused at the threshold and looked behind her. On leaving earlier that night, she thought she might burst with all the nameless and directionless emotions clamoring within her. She'd gone out to escape herself, not to find a man. Yet she did, and she was glad of it. Now she felt free. No, not just free. Reborn. As she ran to her room, she stripped off her suffocating costume.

Her maid, Prizzi, scooped up the flying pieces as they hit the ground. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing. I thought I was followed, but I wasn't."

"You would never have taken fright if you'd allowed me to come with you," Prizzi groused.

Unrepentant, Serena grinned up at Prizzi. Her maid was nearly six feet tall, her skin a shining blue-black. "You're right, I would not have taken fright, for I know you would defend me like a lioness."

Her husband gave Prizzi to her as a maid when she first moved into his house. Alone, frightened and just fourteen,

Serena had needed a friend more than a maid. The two girls could not have been more different, Serena being small, pale and sheltered, and Prizzi tall, dark and worldly-wise at seventeen, but they did become friends. Prizzi performed the basic tasks of a lady's maid, caring for Serena's wardrobe and person, but most of the time she did and said exactly as she pleased.

Serena unpinned her stomacher while Prizzi untied her skirts. Heaps of discarded clothing piled up around her feet until she stood in only her shift, stockings and stays. "You're right," Serena went on. "Next time I go out, you'll come with me. I will dress you as a man, and then we can go anywhere we want."

"Very likely!" Prizzi laughed, moving behind her. "And very respectable too. Would you like me to escort you to the Ridotto to play for high stakes, or perhaps we should visit a brothel? Is your head full of stuffing? And just how did you manage to tear the lace at your neck?"

"Em..."

"You know I won't be able to find another piece to match—" Prizzi gasped. "Serena Maria Teresa! What have you been doing?"

Serena threw aside her stays and took Prizzi by her elbows. "Having an adventure for the first time in my life."

Amazed, Prizzi touched the rosy marks of passion that stained Serena's breast. "Do you mean to tell me that in such a short time you managed to find a man and went..?"

Sinful as it was, Serena couldn't repress her grin. "To an alley."

"Oh, Serena! What kind of man would treat a lady like a street walker?"

A man who does not know the difference, Serena thought, but she only shrugged.

Prizzi sniffed. "A scoundrel, that's who. A man of absolutely no quality. I agree that you need a lover, but you must wait until you are out of mourning, and then you should choose a discreet man, a gentleman."

"Where would I find one of those? Who, among our circle of acquaintance, would you think I would like to take as a lover? Signore Ghisi, perhaps, with his chubby little hands? Or that horrible Englishman, Mr. Collier?" She cleared her throat in imitation of him. "Ah ... ahh ... hem."

Prizzi laughed and covered her eyes. "Please don't put the picture in my mind!" Sobering a little, she sat down on a footstool, her arms full of clothing. "But we must be serious, you and I. You cannot be catting around, my love. The priest will tell you why it is wrong, and you can listen to him or not. I will tell you why it is dangerous. First, you may come up with child. If you do, you want a lover who can and will support you when you have to retire to the country in shame."

Serena tied on her dressing gown. "Seven years barren and you still hope for me, Prizzi? A babe is the least of my concerns. Try to frighten me some other way."

"The French disease, then," Prizzi answered, her almond eyes serious, unblinking. "Whores carry it, as do men who whore with them."

Now this made Serena blanch. She did not fancy the idea of watching her nose rot off. Or going insane. Or watching her nose fall off while she went insane. Her stranger had seemed all too confident in the ways of whores. Crossing herself, she sent up a prayer to heaven for forgiveness. "I'll confess tomorrow. I promise I will not do it again. Perhaps I should take a bath tonight?"

"That's my sensible Serena." Prizzi rang the bell for a bath. "Have patience and we will find a good lover for you. Or, who knows, maybe even a husband."

"No more husbands, that I am sure of." Serena sighed, and hoped her future lover would kiss as well as that whoring rogue in the Campo Santo Stefano

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Chapter Two

Dante sat alone outside a coffeehouse in the Piazza San Marco, his sharp eyes scanning the crowd for hats with one red plume among white. All of his servants were out in the streets, searching. All of his ship's crew, or at least those sober enough to stand, he had also paid to search. Venice swelled at its seams with Carnival revelers, making the task of finding one small woman daunting. What gave him hope was that the public squares, where everyone went eventually—to display themselves, to dance, to gawk—were finite in number. If she came out tonight, she would end in one of them, where his people waited, and then he'd have her.

"Come on, my beauty," he invoked her under his breath. "Come out to play again."

That night, a low mist blanketed the city, making the search that much more difficult. At least it was not a concealing fog, the kind that swallowed the city whole, but it was dense enough that he could not see the far side of the square. Knee-deep in mist, masqueraders paraded up and down the *listone*, preening and posing for the gathered onlookers. They kept him entertained as he watched and waited, unable to leave his seat for fear of missing a report from his men. Satyrs and demons, dominoes and clowns, Indians and gods, satirical lawyers and menacing plague doctors with beaked masks passed him by. He saw plenty of whores dressed as nuns. More than anything else, though, he

saw men disguised as women. One carried an infant—a very disgruntled swaddled cat. Another showed off a hugely pregnant belly made of cheese, which onlookers tried to bite. Some of these feathered and resplendent amazons stopped by his table to flirt with him. Women dressed as men, too—smallish, large bottomed men—but they were dull birds by comparison.

"Capitano! I have her!" Gianni, his ship's carpenter, came running to the table in his rolling sailor's gait.

Dante leapt to his feet. "Where?"

"She comes here, she comes to San Marco! I ran ahead."

"You let her out of your sight?" He nearly struck the man.

"There is no where else for her to go! She'll be here in seconds." Gianni pointed to the mouth of the square.

Dante grabbed the man by the arm. "You're sure it's her?"

"Slight, nice walk, one red feather among white. But, Capitano, you should know she walks with a man. A black man."

"I don't care if she walks with the Moor himself."

By the time he found her, the blood pounded in his ears. How he could be so obsessed with a woman in a mask, he did not know. He took a broad stance in her path. When she found her way blocked, she jumped backward, skittish, and her companion stepped forward to shield her. Dante held his hands wide to show them he was harmless and bowed. Like them, he wore the *bautta* that night, for he reasoned she would recognize him better with it than without.

"My lady, I believe I made your acquaintance last night." He offered her a self-deprecating smile. "All too briefly, I'm

afraid. I have hoped for an opportunity to address you again. My name is—"

She slipped in front of her protector and put a hand up to stop his words. "Please, don't." She spoke in a husky whisper that sent shivers down his spine.

He caught her hand and brought it to his mouth. If her man wanted to fight for her, he was more than ready, and he was bigger. "How else can I come to know you better?" he asked.

She cast a quick glance back at her companion, then edged closer to him. "Signore, please, this is not safe."

"Is that your man?" he asked in a low voice, keeping hold of her hand. "Would you like to be free of him?"

"That is my servant," she said.

Better and better. No bloodshed to start. "I could not sleep last night because of you, *donna molto bella*." He laid a long kiss on her knuckles, felt her hand jerk then relax.

Encouraged, he slipped his thumb into her palm and caressed it as he spoke. "I fear I may have offended you by taking you for something you are not. I wish to make amends."

"You've not offended me," she whispered, almost too low to be heard. "I must go now."

Afraid to lose her again, Dante gambled on frankness. It would either frighten her away or reel her in. Keeping hold of her hand, he stood as close to her as he could without touching her, and spoke into her ear. "Last night you came out seeking pleasure, did you not? You didn't find as much of it as you could with me, and I regret that. If you would spend tonight with me, I will show you pleasure beyond imagining."

"You think much of your abilities, sir," she said, trying to reclaim her hand.

This show of coyness amused him, considering her manners the night before. "I am confident in my talents."

"Tell me, does one need talent to lie with whores?"

Dante could not repress a smile. He rather liked women with claws. "Whores will teach you many things you cannot learn from ladies."

She weighed his words, then asked in her sultry whisper, "Do you have the French disease?"

"What?" he exclaimed. Her white mask regarded him impassively in the torchlight. The brim of her hat cast a shadow over her eyes so he could not read their expression. Then her mouth, that damned mouth which drove him to this insanity, curled up at the corners, laughing at him. "I do not!"

She spun around and returned to her servant. They engaged in a conversation of urgent whispers that he could not catch. He rocked on his heels while he waited. She returned in a whirl of robes and asked, "How do I know that you are not lying?"

He drew up to his full, indignant height. "I am a gentleman. I would not lie about such a thing."

"What if you are not a gentleman at all?"

"You didn't care so much about that last night!" he snapped. She turned her back on him.

"Wait." Dante leapt forward to block her path. "I apologize. Please, let me show you what a gentleman I am. I will pleasure you and take none for myself. I will not so much as

loosen a button of my own clothing. I swear it. It's the least I can do after being so selfish last night."

Another long pause, and then the glorious question, "Where would we go?"

"To a gondola," he answered, grabbing at the first of many fantasies he had already woven involving her. Back she went to the servant, and this time launched into a full blown argument with him. Most likely he was assigned to watch her movements for her keeper. Dante considered offering him something to smooth their way, but before he could, she ended the argument and returned to stand in front of him.

"I'll give you half an hour." He had to lean close to hear her. "I won't remove my mask and neither will you. The gondola must come back to the same launching point. My servant will wait there to make sure I am returned safely."

"Two hours."

"One."

"Done."

Working hard not to jig, Dante offered her his arm, and the three of them walked with great dignity to the quay at the edge of the piazza. At the water's edge, he hired a gondola with a cabin. Dante owned a gondola, but like all of his servants, his gondolier was out looking for her. While he assisted his hard won lady into the curtained cabin, her servant spoke with the gondolier and passed him some coin.

As the gondolier poled away from the moorings, Dante paid the man double to ignore whatever her servant had told him. "I don't care where you go. Just keep your nose to yourself and don't whistle."

The only light in the cabin came from a small heating brazier. In that red gloom, he could see her pressed against the seat, tense as a cat. Intense negotiation, he had found, rarely led to romance. Wine often did. He wished he had thought to bring some. "Thank you for joining me," he began, taking the seat beside her. "What shall I call you?"

"I have no name," she whispered.

"Why do you speak in whispers? We're alone."

"I have no voice."

"I see." He rubbed his chin. This night he had made a point of shaving. "Then I will call you Bella, if you do not mind. May I ask who is this man of yours that keeps you so fearful?"

"You don't want to know. You don't want to know who I am, lest you recognize me. I don't want to know who you are and be forced to acknowledge you later. Do you understand?"

"I will respect your wishes." He understood that there were plenty of powerful men in this city who would not appreciate his tampering with their mistress, but she spoke as if this man was well known and dangerous. Dante wondered who he might be. Already he knew most of the powerful men in the city.

Even with that reassurance, she still pressed herself back in the corner. He wondered what had happened to the wanton adventuress from the night before.

"May I take your hat?" he asked. "Your hood?" As he unfastened the neck of her hood, he felt the fast rise and fall of her breast. "Are you afraid, Bella?"

"No," she whispered. He did not believe her.

He set the hood aside. With these coverings gone, she became a woman instead of a cipher. A woman with a small, round head balanced on a swan's neck. A woman with fair hair gathered at her nape, and pointed little ears. In the dim light, he could read her eyes just enough to know how intently she studied him. Their color was difficult to judge. Grey or blue perhaps. Not dark. The mask covered her nose and curved over her cheeks, but unless it hid something unexpected, he suspected she would be beautiful with it off.

Her small white hands fluttered into the air tentatively, as if she were making a decision. Suddenly resolute, she threw aside his hat and pushed off his hood. She stroked either side of his head, then sank her fingers into his hair.

Smiling, he pulled the ribbon at the back of his neck and freed his hair for her, thinking—hoping—that the man who kept her possessed a total of two or three strands combed over his pate.

Her delicate fingers ranged over his mask, his jaw, and then returned to his hair. Islanders who had never seen a European before had touched him in much the same way: innocent, unabashed, curious. She traced his lips with her fingertips. That feather-light touch shot down to his toes. He cupped his hand over hers and kissed her palm.

That familiar, peculiar scent he had noticed the night before was on her hand. It evoked memories of the excitement of leaving port with a clean, newly rigged ship and hold full of stores. A woman's scent did not usually send his mind in that particular direction. Dante turned her hand over and kissed her knuckles, inhaling deeply. The answer came to

him. *Linseed oil*. Shipboard it was used to waterproof wood and cloth, in mixing varnish and the like, but what would she be doing with it?

He realized that she was staring at him, wondering why he snuffled at her hand. Putting aside the question of linseed oil, he released her hand. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her until she forgot whatever fears governed her. The night before she had needed no coaxing whatsoever, but this night, for whatever reason, she was different. So he waited her to come to him.

This confused her. He could see it in the tilt of her head. She leaned closer. Her warm breath drifted across his cheek. Inside, he screamed for her touch, but he did not move. Another endless second passed, and then the smile appeared. His heart leapt to see it. She raised one hand to his cheek and kissed him as she had the night before. Once she decided to move forward, there was nothing modest, or even coy, about her kiss. Its honesty took his breath and set him afire.

Her mouth opened to his and he left off thinking altogether. That is, until their masks knocked together. They both had to remember to hold their heads just so or that would happen. It had not bothered him so much in the alley, but now Dante bridled at the awkwardness of it all.

"Surely we can take these things off now, Bella?"

"Already you question my rules?" Her smile curled against his lips.

"You are a cruel woman, *cara mia*." To hold her was to want her, but he had given up that claim for this night. This night was about penance. So he prepared to suffer.

Her stays pushed her breasts into perfect half-circles above the neck of her gown. He kissed the crest of each one while he loosened the ties at her back. Bella sat at the edge of the seat, her breath coming in shallow pants. The stays gave and he peeled down the fine linen of her shift to cup his hand over one warm breast. She softened and leaned into his hand, openly sensual. Dante began to suspect she would not be hard to please.

"Your breasts are beautiful, Bella, like white doves." Pressing her back against the seat, he first stroked her entire breast using only the tips of his fingers, then caressed deeply with his palms. Like her, her breasts were not large, but they were creamy white, high set, virginal. As he teased their tips to hardness, her breath caught over and over. Taking the weight of first one in his hand, then the other, he dipped his head down and laved the nipples, soothing them in turn, then sucking them deep into his mouth. Under his attentions she made a wonderful noise, very like purring. Running his tongue along the underside of her breast, he reveled in the elemental pleasure of her satin skin against his cheek, her salty taste, the purely female scent rising from her bodice.

They had nothing but time, so he decided to draw out every moment. Leaving one hand on her breast, he began to lay slow kisses along her collarbones, dipping his tongue in the hollow between them. He lingered over her pulse. Only a little of her skin was exposed to his attentions. He did not plan to miss an inch of it. With slow deliberation, he kissed his way up the long line of her throat, sucking, nipping until she moaned.

One of her hands flexed in his hair, the other slid down to the back of his neck. Her breathing had slowed. She was right where he wanted her—very pleased, but not too warm. He nuzzled beneath her chin and behind her ear. Under his hands and mouth, he felt her limbs grow soft and loose. He could do anything with her now. Several appealing options occurred to him, none of which were legal that night.

"Bella, sit in my lap," he whispered, reluctant to disturb her dream. She quirked one corner of her mouth up as if she knew his plans and conspired with him. He could not help but kiss her for it, kiss her rather more than he intended. Then she slipped her sweet tongue into his mouth and he lost track of all his resolutions.

She slid down the seat to lie on her back and pulled him over her decisively. *Madonna Santissima!* He felt a lurch, thought it was the gondola at first, then realized it was his heart, his stomach, his cock. Blind, burning, he crushed her against the seat and pillaged her mouth, while she urged him on flagrantly, parting her legs for him, pressing her hips against his. Without any conscious intention, his hands began to bunch her skirts higher and higher and skimmed up her supple, bare thighs. All his blood screamed for possession, honor be damned.

With supreme effort, he denied that call. Not out of honor, the truth be told, but out of fear of losing her again to impatience. Nothing else could have restrained him. He retreated, modulating their kiss into gentleness, lifting himself off her. He resumed his original course. "Come, sit on my lap."

Taking her place on the bench, he arranged her sideways on his lap, so that he could cradle her and have all her parts in easy reach. The gondola rocked as they shifted their weight. He started by removing her shoes and rolling off her stockings. Her newly bare skin erupted into gooseflesh as he brushed his palms up her calves. Under her mask, her mouth was a soft circle of pleasure and her eyes were closed. She waited for his kiss. He let her wait. Instead let his hand roam gently over her legs, stroking her behind the knees. Finally, he took her full lower lip between his and nibbled it playfully.

Impatient, she caught his head between her palms and kissed him hard. Even as he fell into her kiss, he trailed his fingers up, along the satin skin inside her thighs, and skimmed over the curls between her legs. Her kiss faltered, slowed. He did not linger there, but instead went on to circle her hip. Then he returned to her center again, only to rise up and caress her belly. The third time his hand went between her legs, it stayed there, cupping her gently. She was scalding hot and damp on the outside. Now she stopped kissing him. He knew she did not breathe. Very carefully, he extended a finger and parted her sweet, wet flesh. She gasped.

This was new to her. If he had ever felt the slightest guilt over poaching another man's mistress, he felt none now. A man who did not even try to please his mistress did not deserve to keep her. He slid two fingers along her wetness, back and forth. Immediately her hips twitched in response. *Slow, slow.* Not wishing to stimulate her too much, too fast,

he rotated his fingers in a wide ellipse. Moaning her disagreement, she parted her legs for him even more.

"You like this, Bella?" She may not have heard him. With his other hand, he gently tugged her nipple. Much sooner than he expected, she gasped again and gave a choking cry. A little spasm wracked her body. Leaving his hand resting in the warmth between her legs, he bent to kiss her.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Your pleasure, *cara*." He kissed her again. "And that was only the beginning."

Serena blinked at his response, not sure she wanted more pleasure. The devil was in this man. "That was enough, I'm sure," she said.

"I'm sure it wasn't enough," His voice rumbled through her. "Trust me. You will like this next thing."

Slipping out from under her, he came to kneel in front of her, placing one hand on each knee. "Bella, will you do me the greatest favor?" She cocked her head at him. "Will you lift your breasts in your own pretty hands?"

"Like this?" She felt like a Madonna in a painting, offering up her holy breasts.

"Yes, and touch the tips too. Pleasure yourself."

"I thought that was your job," she said, but did as he asked. Her breasts were swollen and heavier than she had ever felt them, the nipples almost too sensitive to touch.

"And a fine job it is, but I can only do so much from down here." His teeth flashed white in the gloom.

"And just what are you doing down there?"

"As I said, seeing to your pleasure. Do not think it strange, and do not neglect your breasts. I leave them in your care."

With that he flipped up her skirts, parted her legs and pulled her bottom to the edge of the seat. Serena looked down at him over a mountain of jumbled skirts. He would not take her. He said he would not. Anyway, he was still fully dressed. His warm hands slid down the inside of her thighs, and once again he began to stroke her with his fingers.

"Mmm," she said, discovering that her flesh was now extra sensitive and finely tuned.

"Mmm," he agreed and kissed her between her legs. She neglected her breasts to slap her hands down on the seat in surprise. He hooked his arms around her legs, holding them steady. Slippery and strong, his tongue lapped her where she was most open in one, long, broad stroke.

"Oh!" she gasped. Nothing in her life had ever felt quite so ... pleasing. He repeated it and she fell back against the seat cushions, mouth open.

"Open your legs, Bella." His voice was deep and rough. "Give it all to me."

Serena closed her eyes and opened her legs wide. He made an approving noise and ran his tongue over the fine skin of her inner thighs. His long hair trailed over her legs as he did, sending shivers through her.

"Please," she whispered, clutching the cushions. He dipped his head down, swirled his tongue up and down her wet center, where she was naked, raw, stretched open, exposed like never before. Another shiver passed through her. He bent his head to her in earnest. The world stilled and shrank so it

only held them. She drifted on deep waves of pleasure. All she could hear was his lapping—or was that water on the side of the boat? Did they rock on the waves, or did she rock? As he had predicted, her breasts longed for his touch, so she cradled them herself and was lost for a few minutes, or a few hours.

"You taste like heaven," he murmured. The vibrations from his voice shot through her like an arrow, and she clasped his head, digging her fingers into his thick black hair. "Steady, *cara*," His deep chuckle sent another bolt through her.

With effort, she let go of his head and leaned back against the seat cushions. He escalated his attentions, sliding one finger deep inside her while he flicked and lapped higher up, then added a second finger. With these fingers, he stroked her from the inside, so she felt full, and coaxed. Coaxed into what? Into some building fever, into some swelling, dark ocean that threatened to swallow her whole. "No," she groaned. If he did not stop, she feared she would drown in that dark ocean.

Dante fought to hold down her hips as she tried to wiggle out from under him. Her legs kicked high, found purchase on his shoulder and tried to push him away. All he could do was force her to finish and hope she did not kick his brains in first. He ducked his shoulders and lifted her hips. Knowing she was in no condition to notice, he shoved the mask up to his forehead so that he could bury his nose in her. He pressed his fingers deep inside her and sucked her clitoris.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh, no! No! *Oh!*" For a woman who never spoke above a whisper, she had good lungs. In passing, he

wondered how many other boats floated nearby. "Oh! God!" Suddenly, she went eerily silent and still. Her inner muscles contracted around his fingers and held. Dante fancied that all of Venice hung suspended with her. He scissored his fingers inside her once, twice, and she came apart, shaking and sobbing.

A new surge of wetness, fresh and sweet, coated his tongue. For as long as she rocked and twitched under his hands, he lapped at her. When she finally stilled, he sat back on his heels, exhausted. He remembered to drop his mask into place again. Peeking up over her skirts, he saw her slumped back against the seat, limp as a rag, one small hand draped over her bare breast.

The sight aroused distinctly proprietary feelings in Dante. He would like to see her that way often. Easing his fingers from inside her, he leaned over to kiss both breasts. When that did not rouse her, he stroked her cheek until she stirred. Her head rolled his direction and both corners of her mouth curled up for him. With his finger he traced their parting until she opened them, and then he laid his finger on her tongue. She closed her mouth and suckled, tasting herself. Smiling like a cat after cream, she grabbed him by the ears and pulled him close.

Then he knew he had done well and smiled into the kiss. He did not mind that his knees hurt. He did not mind his bruised shoulders. He did not mind that his cock would soon fall off. The lady was well pleased.

She worked her hands inside his shirt and continued to kiss him with what seemed suspiciously like increasing

urgency. He did not think she had it in her, until she said in a hoarse whisper "Take me. I want you inside."

"But we had an agreement!" Even to his own ears he sounded like some disgruntled merchant.

"But don't you want to be inside of me?" she asked, innocent as a lamb, her hands rather less innocent.

By all the saints and martyrs, he wanted inside her. But this time he would not think with his cock. Now that he had leverage over her, he planned to use it. Disconnecting her hand from the front of his breeches, he kissed her and said, "Bella, as you reminded me not so long ago, we must abide by our agreement."

He pulled the curtain aside and thanked heaven that lights of San Marco were so close. "Our time is up. Your servant will be waiting."

She made a dismissive gesture. "I'll tell her to go away, and then we can go out again."

"Her?"

"Him, I mean." Her fingers swirled around his ears, traced the edge of his mask. More than anything he wanted to take their masks off, kiss her eyelids, kiss her brow. The little minx wiggled nearer, nibbled on his earlobe and asked, "Shall we go out again?"

"If we are to make love, Bella, I want to do it in a comfortable bed, not in this cramped cabin."

She reared back and tried to pull away from him, not at all pleased by his refusal. Dante fought to tempt her. Under the pretext of slipping her shift back up over her shoulders, he lingered over her pink, swollen breasts. Bending to kiss each

one, he said, "I want to feel your skin against my skin. I want to take a long time with you."

"It's dangerous meeting with you." Yet even as she spoke the words, her hands were roaming his body, her mouth was seeking his.

"Danger be damned. Meet me tomorrow. I know a little tavern with a couple of rooms above. The landlord is a friend. He would not betray us."

The gondola bumped against its moorings. The ride was over. Avoiding one another's elbows, they both assumed the *bautta* again and crept out of the cabin in full disguise. Bella wobbled and clung to the cabin's roof.

"My knees are jelly," she said.

Dante scooped her up and carried her off the gondola, carefully setting her down beside her watchful servant. When he returned to pay the gondolier, the man gave him a conspiratorial wink.

When he turned around, he saw Bella hobbling away on her servant's arm. "Wait!" he called, catching up with them in a few long strides. "What of tomorrow?"

"I can't," she said.

He bent to her ear. "Can you trust this servant?"

"Yes, speak freely."

He gave her the name of the tavern, and the church nearest it. "Ask for Luigi. He will be expecting you. I'll wait there for you from noon to three o'clock. Surely during those hours you can go out to shop, or confess, or something."

"I will consider it, but I do not promise," she said in her whisper, which he now found absolutely captivating.

He took her by the neck and kissed her goodbye thoroughly, hoping to leave her wanting more. When he let go, she staggered backward.

"You will come," he told her.

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Chapter Three

The next morning at breakfast, Serena toyed with the idea of meeting him. Prizzi advised against it, saying Serena could not afford to make herself vulnerable to some whoring scoundrel she didn't even know. She warned of blackmail and worse. Serena knew it would be more sensible for her to search for a respectable lover in her own circle. Yet the prospect of an afternoon in bed with her scoundrel, her whoremonger, was a tempting prospect indeed. The things he did to her, things she could not even name, lingered in her thoughts and made her smile at all the wrong moments. She let the decision rest that morning while she painted. Working always cleared her mind. At noon she would decide one way or another.

In her studio, she poked at the dabs of color on her palette with her knife, peeling off the dried top layers to reveal fresh paint beneath. All of the colors were good, except the raw umber, which had dwindled down to a dry skin which she scraped off and threw away. The jar of raw umber was empty too. She sighed in resignation, blowing a piece of hair out of her eyes. It was time to mix up some more.

Serena scooped several nuggets of soft, greenish brown rock into a mortar and pestle and wished for the thousandth time that she had an apprentice to do this work for her. A real artist would have an apprentice. With a firm twist of her wrist, she began to smash the hard pigment into fine dust. No family would apprentice their son to a lady painter. Where

would that get him? Nowhere at all. They would want their boy apprenticed to a well-known artist, such as Piero Lombardo. The cruelty of it all was that she *was* Piero Lombardo. Only no one could ever know it if she wished to continue selling work.

Rosa, the chambermaid, might be induced to grind paint for her. Lord knew the girl had little enough to do now that Alberenghi was gone. Serena dismissed the idea, though. It was backbreaking work, but it also required some sensitivity. Each color behaved differently and needed special handling. Unless the world turned upside down and female artists became respectable, she was doomed to do it all herself.

Painting could be a perfectly respectable pastime for a lady, as long as she kept it a hobby and never dared become good at it. The problem was that Serena was quite good at it. Even as a child, she made charming scribbles, and when she was a new bride, Alberenghi spoiled her by hiring a drawing master.

Finding her drawing skills well developed already, Signore Minote taught her how to paint in watercolors, as was proper for a lady with an artistic bent. A lady looked refined dabbling away at a watercolor. For a while, Serena was happy enough doing this. But by the time she was sixteen, it was no longer enough for her. More than anything, Serena wanted to capture the world in her paintings. The flat, bright hues of watercolors could not represent the subtleties of the real world as well as oil.

Serena begged her master to teach her how to use oil. He had waved his hands in front of him. "No, no, Signora

Alberenghi, you don't want to do that." Oil painting was a craft that had to be studied for years, he tried to explain. The materials stank, stained and oozed. Grinding the colors required strong hands and shoulders. Just to prepare a panel to accept paint was an art in itself. Oil was not a lady's medium, he insisted. It was too much bother to be worthwhile.

Serena had to admit that he was right about most of what he said. It was a mess. It was hard work. She dumped the freshly ground pigment powder onto a slab. Using a heavy muller made of porphyry, she began to work linseed oil into the powder to make a paste, grinding the oil and powder relentlessly under the hard stone. It was a forced marriage. The oil and pigment did not want anything to do with the other. Only her will bound them into paint.

In the end, she won over her master's objections by doubling his fee. The master went to her husband for permission before he accepted her offer. Serena had followed behind and stood in the door to watch. As she expected, Alberenghi waved his hands at Minote. "Go on. Teach the chit anything she likes."

Alberenghi approved of her painting, whether it was oil or watercolor, whether it was good, bad or indifferent, because it was a quiet occupation and he cherished his peace. Far better for his young wife to be closed up with her brushes than to be entertaining flocks of chattering women or banging away on the harpsichord.

So Serena learned to paint like a man. With no children and very few demands from her husband, she was able to

paint as much as she wanted. It was a peaceful life. Though young, she was reclusive by nature, and happily spent long days painting in silence among her husband's collections of Greek and Roman antiquities. At night she listened to his scholar's talk of Constantine and Tacitus over dinner, then read by the fire with him until bedtime.

Her teacher eventually left her to make his fortune in England painting English estates in such a way that they looked Italian. But before he went away he put a seed in her mind. First, he praised her, saying she had been his best student and that her work was as good as any man's. Then he joked that she could make a pretty penny selling her views of Venice to English tourists.

Of course he was not serious. A woman of Serena's breeding would never soil her family's name by earning money through trade, and he would never encourage her to do so. She painted in oil, yes, and she painted well, but it could never be more than a hobby for her.

He could not know how she held onto his words and painted more seriously than ever once he was gone. She knew her paintings were good. She wanted them to go out into the world, where other people could enjoy them. Alberenghi was an indulgent husband, but he was not so indulgent that he would allow her to sell her work. She schemed up various ways to sell her work anonymously, but could not bring herself to deceive her husband or risk embarrassing him. So Piero Lombardo was born only after her husband passed away.

Around eleven she heard the front bell. In a few moments, the maid brought a letter in.

"Who is it from? Hold it up for me." Her hands were filthy. She was surprised to see the name of her landlord on the back: Valaresso. Arturo Valaresso was dead. Her lawyers sent the rent to his family's lawyers. After a quick wipe of her hands, she took the letter from the maid. It came from Signore Valaresso's son. She remembered Arturo speaking of his only son with some pride, but she had never met the man. As she recalled, he owned and captained a ship or two, and spent years on end trading in far off lands.

I offer you my sincere condolences on the death of your husband. I know my father cherished his friendship with S. Alberenghi, and though I wish it were otherwise, it is somehow not surprising that my father followed after your husband so closely.

She skimmed anxiously over a few more lines about the virtues of both deceased men, dreading to find out where this all led. The man would not send a simple condolence letter six months after the fact.

As there is a season for all things, it is now time for me to leave the sea and make Ca' Valaresso my home. I must admit I was surprised when my lawyers informed me that you were still a tenant in our house. I had assumed you would have found a new situation by this time. My lawyers are at fault not making your status clear to you.

In other words, he meant she had no right to be there at all. Which she knew well.

My plans for the house include a complete renovation of the building, which includes dismantling the two apartments to make it a single residence again.

Some long gone Valaresso had split the old palazzo into two apartments, most likely for income. The family was noble, but their fortune had been in decline for generations. Arturo Valaresso had lived in the lower apartment, and for many years her husband leased the upper apartment from his for next to nothing. The two old friends found it convenient to live close, especially toward the end of their lives, when they spent hours together each day, usually sitting out on the balcony, arguing philosophy and playing chess.

Now Arturo's ambitious son wanted to make the entire palazzo into one grand residence for himself, and she was in his way.

I can happily allow you two full months to make your relocation, as it will take that long before the necessary arrangements can be made with the city and the builders.

Serena knew she had no grounds to challenge him. There was no lease to speak of, only a gentleman's agreement between two dead men. In a postscript, she read that he would be moving into the lower apartment that very day and hoped he might call on her the next morning to discuss the matter personally.

"I will look forward to it with the greatest anticipation, Signore Dante Arturo Valaresso." She tossed the letter aside and called for Prizzi.

Prizzi read the letter and counseled, "It only forces a decision you know you would have to make eventually."

Serena knew it well. Since her husband's death, she lived in a curious state of freedom, a rare, magical state. Each day was hers to do exactly as she pleased, with no one to tell her otherwise. She knew it could not last forever, but planned to make it last as long as she could. Her family lived far away. They assumed, of course, that she would move home sooner or later, but they were so preoccupied with the problems of her debt-ridden older brother and the upcoming wedding of her youngest sister that they did not seem to notice the months passing by.

To the rest of society, she was a retiring widow, deep in mourning, necessarily reclusive. The few ladies who called on her might have wondered at her isolation, but had not said anything about it yet. Serena had no family obligations, no social obligations, no suitors, no pressure to remarry—and now, an exciting lover. Life was perfect. Until today.

"Damn that man! Without his interference, I might have squeaked by another six months. By that time, I might have been able to support us." With her brush point, she gestured to the panels in different states of completion arranged around the room. "Piero Lombardo has several commissions outstanding. I have to at least stay through summer to finish them. Why can't this Valaresso just keep sailing in circles? What does a sea captain care for architecture anyway?"

Prizzi shook her head mournfully and gazed out over the canal. Despite her foul mood, Serena could not help but admire the noble shape of her friend's head, outlined against the bright window. Over the years, she had drawn Prizzi countless times. When she was a girl, she liked to imagine

that Prizzi had been born a queen in Africa, though she knew perfectly well that she was born in Venice.

"I don't want to go back to Lombardy, Prizzi, and you certainly should not go. There is nothing to do there and the farmers will stare at you. We will find you a new situation before I leave."

"Rena, I would not leave you!" Prizzi exclaimed. "I'm not afraid of the rustics." Then she laughed, "But I must admit that I've never been fond of cows."

"You will have to get used to them if you come with me." Serena walked to the tall windows to stand next to her. "I cannot imagine leaving this place."

Ca' Valaresso sat on the Grand Canal, rising straight out of that famous waterway. Beneath its rows of graceful gothic windows, gondolas and other light craft plied up and down the canal. To the east she could see the grand dome of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute and the bustling Basin of San Marco beyond it. Her home commanded one of the best views in Venice and was an artist's dream. From these broad windows, Serena tried to capture the canal and the tall buildings that lined it and the changing moods of light. Or she turned her attention downward and painted the little dramas playing out on the water: lovers flirting between boats, servants lowering their baskets down to the floating vegetable sellers, haughty noblemen who made a point of standing, rather than sitting, in their private gondolas.

"I will try to negotiate with him, for all the good it will do." She pressed her nose against the glass, leaving a print. Abruptly she made a decision. "At least I know what I am

going to do for the rest of today. I'm going to meet my whoremonger. I need the distraction, and I do not care if it is wise or not."

Prizzi begged her not to be reckless, to at least remain anonymous. Serena agreed with that precaution, but exchanged her stiff, white mask for a smaller, more comfortable black silk mask and Prizzi put on one of her own. When they went out, they were not alone in being masked. Even in this quiet part of the city, more than half of the people they passed were masked—not costumed, just masked, or wearing the full *bautta*.

Not much longer, Serena thought, with some regret. It was only legal to wear masks in Venice from October through Lent. After that she would have to behave better. Many people would have to behave better. To be sure, some of the people around her wore masks for legitimate reasons. Women were required to wear the *bautta* to the theater, for instance. But she had no doubt that plenty of the stark black and white faces she walked past hid people avoiding their creditors, going somewhere they ought not, or sneaking off to see lovers of their own.

As they came nearer their destination, scenes from the night before played over and over in Serena's mind, so much so that she could barely attend to anything Prizzi said to her. Using the church as a landmark, they easily found the tavern, little more than a hole in the wall, and its grizzled owner, Luigi. Her whoremonger waited in a room upstairs. Serena sent Prizzi before her with a mask for him and orders that he should put it on if he wanted her company.

While she waited, she shook, not so much from fear, but from excitement. Luigi eyed her, but not to the point of rudeness. Prizzi returned in a minute, signaling to her that he had agreed. Heart leaping up her throat, Serena forced herself to walk with slow dignity up the stairs to the first door on the right. With a trembling hand, she knocked.

The door flew open. He had been waiting at it. The mask was on, his black hair was unbound and fell nearly to his shoulders. All he wore was a plain shirt and breeches. Serena thought he looked like a pirate. Neither of them moved or said anything until he broke the spell by offering her his hand. She took it. He drew her into the room. Before he could even close the door, she threw herself into his arms with a little cry of relief.

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Chapter Four

Dante's relief was no less strong. Not at all sure she would come, he had paced the room for an hour in nervous anticipation. But now, to his great joy, his little minx was in his arms, doing her best to eat him alive. As they staggered around the room, he divested her of her long black robes, her hood and her hat. She wore no powder in her hair, and by the light of day he saw for the first time that it was not merely fair, but a glorious, red-tinged blonde. He pulled out the pins and combs which held it up, and it spilled over her shoulders like a cape. The black silk of her mask contrasted so beautifully, so startlingly, with her white skin and golden hair that he almost did not mind it being on her. He cradled her face and brushed his thumbs against the delicate skin of her cheeks. They burst with roses under his touch. Fine black netting stretched behind the holes of her mask, keeping the true color of her eyes a secret still. The mask she made him wear hid his eyes the same way. Nonetheless, by daylight she was twice as beautiful as he had even suspected.

"Bella," he sighed, so happy to have her near once more. They had been apart for twelve hours, which was twelve hours too many. Twining her arms around his neck, she stretched her lithe body along his, straining to press herself against every inch of him. He buried his face in her neck and breathed deeply. She reeked of linseed oil. He'd never be able to put on his oilcloth cloak again without going hard.

Even though he was mostly undressed, she tore at his clothing impatiently. So he pulled off his shirt to please her and began to play lady's maid. It had been a long time since he had stripped down a woman in full armor and had to concentrate to remember how all the little pieces and their fastenings worked. He began by unpinning her stomacher and helped her shed her *contouche*, the robe-like gown which covered all the rest, pausing to nibble around her neck.

Ever the tradesman, he knew the silk of her gown to be of excellent quality, but not at all showy. The cut of it was current enough, but not so fashionable as to be distinct. The color was a common watered blue. She wore no jewelry whatsoever. A well-kept mistress should have a wardrobe of the latest fashions and plenty of jewelry. She did not wear any paint or nail varnish. He wondered if she always dressed in this unadorned way or only today as part of her disguise. As she looked now, she might have just escaped from the convent. *Ah, there's an idea.* She could be a runaway nun.

Catching her from behind, he laid kisses on her graceful nape and the magical space between her shoulder blades. The bones of her neck and shoulders were so delicate that they made him want to weep. One by one, he untied her many skirts. They piled up around her ankles. He set aside her hoops—ridiculous things—and set to work on her stays. By then he was well sick of laces and ties, and resolved that when she was his mistress, he would keep her always in a caftan robe.

When he finally had her stripped down to her fine linen shift, he circled in front of her and saw how her nipples tented

the front of it. Unable to resist, he bent to her breast and suckled her right through the linen. The cloth collapsed under his tongue and the heat of her breast filled his mouth.

Her hands came to his head, and she murmured, as if to herself, "Oh my Lord, I have wanted this."

When he raised his head, he left a wet, transparent circle behind. He held his breath while her hands moved over his skin, skating down his chest, up his sides and around his back. Unable to bear more, he caught her hands and kissed them both. "Are you ready for more pleasure, Bella?"

She bit her full lower lip and nodded. He opened the front of her shift and peeled it over her shoulders, sending it to the floor with the rest of her clothes. At long last she stood naked before him. Venus, he thought, as she lowered her eyes and covered her sex with her hand. Every part of her was perfect to his eye, from her delicate ankles to her slender waist to her pink-tipped breasts, thrusting through her curtain of hair.

Serena quailed under his gaze. All she knew of his eyes was that they were as dark as the rest of him, and now they were raking her boldly from the toes up, burning her alive. Despite her best efforts, she quivered. Though she had already had him once, though he had already proved himself capable of giving her great pleasure, she found him intimidating by the light of day. He was dark skinned, hard with muscle and big of bone. Next to him she felt like the merest wisp.

He reached out with a huge hand and tilted her chin up. "*Cara Bella*, do not cover yourself. You are beautiful."

Serena raised her eyes up to him. Now that he'd changed to a soft mask, there was nothing to hide his broad jaw, his long, high-bridged nose, or his wolf's smile. Both of his shoulders were covered in swirling black lines, strange, primitive marks. Only sailors bore such markings. "You have been to sea?" she asked, careful to hide her voice in a whisper.

"Yes."

That was all he said, but his kisses made her forget to be afraid of him. He kicked off his breeches and pulled her onto the bed with him, rolling with her in his arms so she ended lying on top of him. Under her palms, his skin was so very warm and firm and smooth. She smiled to herself and rested her head on his chest and absorbed his heat into her bones. The long, dreary winter had chilled her more than she thought. Under her belly, she felt him stirring. That part of him, at least, was impatient.

"There is no hurry," he said, reading her thoughts. His voice rumbled in his chest and vibrated through her. Using slow, soothing strokes, he caressed her back and bottom.

As a wife, she had received one visit a week from her gentle, scholarly husband. Alberenghi always wore his nightshirt, was always quick about it, thanked her when he was done and kissed her on the brow as he left. Those visits, which she did not mind—which she hardly noticed after the first year—could not prepare her for today. This massive, unpredictable male creature could not be more unlike her husband.

"What have you been thinking about today, Bella?" he asked.

Half dreaming under his hands, she told him the truth. "You, the gondola, how you touched me."

"Tell me more."

A blush ran up her cheeks, and she was glad her face was against his chest. "I woke up this morning wanting you. I remembered what you did last night, and so I ... I touched myself." She lifted her head, and saw a slow smile spreading over his face. "Was that wrong of me?" she asked.

"No, Bella, not at all."

Serena settled back against him, reassured. She liked being close to him, liked the way his deep voice wrapped around her. Little shivers crossed her neck when his lips brushed her ear.

He asked for her lips and kissed her lingeringly. Then he said, "But to ease your mind on the matter, I think you must confess all. Show me what you did."

Serena drew her brows together. "You want to watch?"

"I do." He drew his finger over her lips, making them tingle. "How did you lie? On your back?"

Serena nodded, and next thing she knew, she was on her back, with him leaning over her.

"Close your eyes, and pretend I am your confessor. Tell me what you were thinking when you first had the notion."

Serena snorted in amusement. Generally, she preferred to confess while clothed. Also, Father Davanzo did not elicit her confessions by running his hands over her body like a sorcerer.

"Give me your confession, Bella." He was marking time by kissing her here and then there, and then here again. The man was not going to give up.

Shamed, and yet thrilled to confess, she closed her eyes before she spoke. "Your tongue. That was what I was thinking about. The things you did with it. How good it felt."

His voice drifted into her ear. "I can see you lying in your bed in the morning light, your hair spread on the pillow. You were sleeping in your shift, but it was twisted up, high around your hips."

"Yes," she breathed, catching his excitement. He described it perfectly. His fantasy, her fantasy, the truth. They were all the same.

"So you were bare and it was easy to touch yourself, to pretend your finger was my tongue. Were you wet when you started?"

"Yes."

"Are you wet now?"

Serena let her knee fall wide. Eyes still closed, she sent her hand down her belly and stroked her center with one inquiring finger. Even through closed eyes, she knew how intently he watched. His warm breath washed across her belly as he leaned ever closer.

"Yes, I am." Because she knew it would please him, she added, "More even than this morning."

It was the truth. She was hot and slick and wanted him inside her so much her eyeteeth ached.

"What did you do with your other hand?"

In answer, she cupped one breast and stroked the nipple with her thumb, matching the rhythm of the finger sliding between her legs. Because he watched, it was better than this morning.

"How did it feel?" His voice came to her like her own thoughts.

"Nice," she gasped, words failing her. "A little like you, but ... I like your tongue better."

"What do you like about my tongue?"

She giggled and turned her head away from him. Were all lovers so inquisitive? She doubted it. "I don't know. It's slippery. It's ... talented. You can point it, can't you?"

In answer, he plunged his pointed tongue deep into her ear, making her shriek and laugh harder. "Stop that! I'm trying to pleasure myself!"

"You seem to be doing very well at it." She could hear the chuckle in his voice.

"Thank you, I think I am."

He was the expert at pleasure, but she was definitely figuring some things out as they spoke. She took a long, shuddering breath.

"Wait, Bella! Don't go."

"Go?" she panted, her fingers moving faster.

"Don't finish. Change what you are doing. Make it last." She moaned in protest, but slowed down and felt some of the rising tension in her recede. He ran his hand lightly over her skin, from shoulder to ankle, and she felt her hair rise wherever it went. She circled her finger slowly, not sure how much longer she could wait.

"What else did you think about this morning, while your fingers were between your legs?"

"I wished I could kiss you. I kissed my pillow instead."

Like a gift from above, his lips came to hover just over hers. Eagerly, she flicked her tongue against them, lured them down just near enough to suck at their fullness. At last he allowed her to capture his lips and she drank him in. Ignoring his injunction, she began to move her fingers boldly against her slickness, calling up the building pleasure.

He slid down the sheets and ran his tongue over the crest of her hip, his hands pressing her thighs open, his rough cheeks scraping her skin. Now there was no separation of fantasy and reality. Just as she had imagined that morning, he moved her hand aside and took over with his talented tongue. This time she opened herself to him without hesitation. Each stroke of his tongue was a bolt running up her spine. His hands slid under her bottom and held her hips high while he feasted on her, more voracious than the night before, devouring her like a like an animal, sucking and slurping. There was no withstanding that attack. She let go within seconds, felt her body contract and explode, the hot honey rushing her veins. He plunged his fingers deep inside her, his knuckles slamming up against her flesh. She cried out and it happened again, another explosion, another rush of wild, shuddering delight. But it was not over. His fingers were still inside her, still plunging, and she felt the pressure building yet again.

"Oh, please!" she wailed.

"Are you watching, Bella?"

At his words, she opened her eyes and saw him kneeling between her legs. His face was flushed, his lips parted, his eyes dark and glittering. "Watch yourself," he said.

She saw her white hips spread wide, rising, thrusting against his fingers. With the fingers of his other hand, he began to tease her from the outside. Writhing under an onslaught of pleasure barely distinguishable from pain, she clutched her breasts and squeezed hard. Her back arched, her legs contracted, her toes curled and she sobbed as ecstasy flooded through her nerves, turning her vision to black and shaking her down to nothing, leaving her limp, wet and gasping on the sheets.

Then he was over her once more, his mouth tasting like musk and honey, his black hair hanging thick around his face. He had more questions. "Is that where your daydreaming ended?" His voice was ragged, deeper than ever.

"No, there was more."

"What else?"

Unwilling to answer, she rolled her head back and forth on the bed. It was best if he didn't know. She might not survive it.

"Tell me, Bella," he insisted, lowering his mouth over hers again. She sank her fingers into his tangled hair and kissed him, sucking on his tongue, his tongue that she liked so very much. Drawing back, he hovered above her, tracing his hands over her shoulders, her tender breasts and on down her body. All of her skin felt new, so very sensitive and alive. He spanned her waist with his hands and opened her navel with his thumbs. She gasped and twitched with each touch. Using

long strokes, he caressed her hips, her thighs. He kissed the hollow between her rising hip bone and her last rib, making her aware of that very feminine curve, then his mouth traveled around her side, toward her back.

Feeling as content as a cat in a patch of sun, she rolled on her belly to accommodate him. He licked her from the base of the spine to the nape, making her shudder all over again. Stretching out over her, he let his pelvis rest against her bottom. His erection nestled between her cheeks, much hotter than the rest of him. She gasped when he began to stroke it back and forth.

No longer languid, Serena's body woke to his call. Instinct made her lift her bottom and lower her head. Instinct made her move along with him. She wanted him to thrust inside. Needed it.

He groaned and took her nape in his teeth. She arched her back and his hands slid around front to hold her breasts. Below, she felt his blunt head resting at her entrance.

"Talk to me, Bella." It sounded as if he could barely speak himself. "Tell me more about this morning."

Serena braced herself against the sheets. "I wanted you inside me. Filling me."

"As we are now?"

"No." she admitted, though she thought it hardly mattered at this point. "I was kissing you."

Before she knew what happened she was on her back again and he'd pressed himself between her knees. He was such a big beast. A dark bull. Pinned on her back, she took in his hungry mouth, his broad chest, his taut belly. And finally,

she let her gaze slip lower still. His cock strained toward her, thick and ruddy. Following her gaze, he took himself in hand and swiped his thumb over the shining head. "This is for you, Bella."

Yes. She trembled thinking about how he'd feel inside her, wondering how it was possible to want something so much. He pressed in ever so slowly. She clutched his back as he did, feeling the tension hardening his spine, the restraint coiling his muscles. Over and over, her breath caught in her throat as he advanced inch by inch. It was as if she had never been taken before. She felt thoroughly invaded—but she also knew that she was capturing him.

More was the primal cry inside her that made her open and open more. When he filled her completely, he stopped moving. He hung over her. She felt herself pulsing around him. It was the sweetest suffering imaginable.

Dante could barely restrain himself from howling in triumph. As hopeless as it seemed that first night, he had won. Bella was stretched out beneath him, naked and moaning, just as he had imagined. Except for the mask. The mask he could live with. He reveled in the moment, drawing it out as long as he could.

Inside, she held him fast, blissfully tight and scalding hot. Outside, she quivered like a trapped bird, her breasts rising and falling with her shallow breaths, her graceful arms so white beside his own. What he would give to see the expression in her eyes.

Capturing her hands above her head, he began to thrust nice and slow. Moaning softly, she arched against him, baring

her white throat. The depth of her reactions amazed him almost as much as the depth of his need. Never had he wanted a woman as much as he wanted this one. Never had a woman felt so right under him.

Dante had every intention of orchestrating her pleasure with patience and precision, but once inside her his only thought was total and complete possession. The urge was so primitive, so violent, that it frightened him. He closed his eyes, sought the restraint to make love to her as she deserved.

Straining against his hands, she pushed against him, begging for more. Thoughts of restraint faded from his mind. Drawing back as far as he could, he plunged deep. Her throaty cries urged him on, so he sank himself over and over into her sweetness. He released her hands so that he could lift her hips, changing the angle of entrance so he could go deeper. He wanted to plow her.

"God, yes!" she screamed as he sank up to his hilt. Inside, she was pure flame, ravenous and slippery hot. Everything he had, he gave her, and she wanted more. Their kisses turned to bites. She clawed his back. The bed creaked and slammed against the wall.

Mine, you are mine. It was his only thought as he took her ruthlessly. She wrapped her legs around his hips and he hammered her into the mattress, pushing her across the sheets. Her hair floated and crackled around her head like a living thing. A smear of blood, his own, he thought, stained her lips, lips which hung open as she cried with every breath: "Ah, ah, ah."

He gathered her to him, crushing her breasts against his chest. Their hips locked together, beating out short devastating thrusts which rushed them toward the end.

"Bella!" he gasped, and froze before it was too late. Beautifully debauched, half animal, she snarled at him, furious at the interruption. He clasped her chin and made her look at his face, his need to master her overriding his need for completion. No one else could give her this. She had to understand. Both of them panted hard. Several teetering seconds passed before she relaxed under his hand, accepting his will. Only then did he thrust into her one last time, straight up to her womb. She shattered. He watched her go, and then followed her into oblivion.

Serena woke in his arms. She tried to lift her head, but could not. Between her legs, her pulse beat strong and steady. Her pirate lover made a soothing noise and stroked her hair.

"*Cara*, are you all right?"

"Yes." The question made her smile.

"You feel good?"

"I feel good." Despite the fact she could scarcely form words.

"Very good? Better than you have ever felt in your life?" His wide grin was contagious.

She laughed at him and she ran her hands over his mask, divining his features beneath it, wishing she could take it off. "Yes! I swear it to you. But what have you done with my bones?"

He kissed her temple, her nipple, her lips. "They will come back. And I know what will help."

Rolling off the bed, he went to the door stark naked, poked his head out and yelled down the stairs. "Luigi! Luigi, man! Send some food up here! Quick! And a bottle of that San Gimignano!"

His call was answered by a chorus of whistles and jests from below, regarding the reason for his appetite. He answered their jibes in equally coarse terms.

Serena shook her head at the exchange while she admired the sight of him from behind, taking in his broad smooth shoulders, the long column of his spine, his lean hips. His muscular buttocks were paler than the rest of him, so his darkness was not due to gypsy blood, but the sun. Beneath, his legs were long and strong and covered with crinkled hair that tickled her legs. She would like to draw him as he was now, one arm leaning on the door jamb, legs crossed, the perfect picture of relaxed insolence as he traded insults with the men downstairs.

Still laughing, he shut the door and walked back to her. She looked at him, then she looked away quickly, heat in her face, and then made herself look back again. He took her breath away.

"What are you?" she asked when he stretched out beside her again.

"What do you mean, little one?" He twisted her hair around his finger.

"Are you a pirate?"

"No," he laughed. "Why?"

"You look like one. Then answer me this. Are you a gentleman with pretensions toward being a scoundrel, or a scoundrel with pretensions toward being a gentleman?"

"You can't tell the difference?"

"No, not at all."

His mouth twisted, and she realized she might have pricked his pride. But she did not know in which direction. In a soft and dangerous voice, he asked, "Which would you like me to be?"

Finding it hard to breathe, she answered, "I find scoundrels more interesting than gentlemen of late."

He kissed her long and hard, and her body stirred to him all over again. They rolled across the bed, kissing, teasing, tangled up in one another, tangled in their sheets. Serena suspected that a sophisticated lover would not smile the foolish way she did, but she could not help it. She smiled into his every kiss.

A knock on the door made them both jump and then groan in unison. He cursed and snapped the blanket off the bed, wrapping it around his hips. Serena hid beneath the sheets. It was Luigi himself, delivering their food. The scent drifted under the linen and made her stomach growl.

They ate in bed. There was no other furniture in the room. Luigi had had delivered up a surprisingly good Venetian feast of baked eel, a rich risotto with radicchio, bread and wine. Serena marveled that she was somehow perfectly comfortable sharing a meal in bed with a stranger, wearing nothing but a piece of silk over her eyes.

He seemed comfortable, too, and she noted how he handled the dishes and served her. By his manners alone, she thought he might actually be a gentleman, despite all evidence to the contrary, such as his clothing, his tattoos, his choice of accommodation, and his whoring. There was so much to learn about him, yet she dared not ask anything, lest she become even more fascinated. She had to guard her heart. Their affair could not last. Soon enough he would go back to sea, or she would go to Lombardy.

He fed her a succulent piece of eel. She sucked it from his fingers, enjoying every moment she had with him. "Tell me something of yourself, Bella. Anything."

"I don't know what I can tell you," she answered, cautious.

He gestured with his wine glass. "What do you do all day, for instance? What would you be doing right now if you were not here?"

"I would be looking out the window." At least it was half of the truth. Looking out the window and painting what she saw. "That is what I do much of every day."

"Then you have a good view, I hope?"

"The best."

"Let me guess, the Grand Canal?"

"Are you trying to pry my address from me? For shame." Serena poured more wine for him. "Now you must tell me something. Tell me about the sea."

To keep him from asking any more questions of her, she plied him with one question after another about his adventures at sea. It seemed a safe enough topic for her heart.

At first his answers were short and jesting, but she kept at him until he opened up and began to weave stories that amazed her. He had seen Egypt, India, St. Petersburg, the Americas, the Pacific. He had been shipwrecked three times, and described the last moments of each ship with great enthusiasm. "That one went down like a heavy stone, less than a minute, I tell you," and "She split right in half, like a cracked nut. We all clung to one side with the rats," and "The ship was beating herself to death onto the rocks. Those of us who could said a prayer and jumped, not knowing if we would hit land or water."

After one of these wrecks, he lived among natives for a full year before he signaled a passing ship. That tribe gave him his bold tattoos. She envied him all his adventures. This affair was the only adventure she had ever had.

"You've made me talk about myself for a long time." He sopped up the last of the risotto with his bread. "You must tell me at least one more thing about yourself."

Serena yawned, the wine and her full belly conspiring to make her sleepy. Nestling her head on her arm, she answered, "Very well. I will tell you all about me. But be warned, the truth may startle you. In brief, I am the natural daughter of high-born Prussians, abandoned in a forest at birth and raised by gypsies." She paused to yawn. "That is, after the gypsies took me from the family of bears who found me first. I am their queen. The queen of the gypsies, not the bears. I live incognito here in Venice to amuse myself."

"I am amazed, madam. I had no idea." He asked her a few more interested questions about her life among the gypsies

and the bears while he finished off what remained of the food. As she answered, her eyelids closed over and over, until she gave in and drifted off to sleep.

A rush of fresh air on her skin woke her. Her mask was loose! Just before it fell off, she clapped her hand to her face. "You untied it!"

He held out his hands in supplication. "I wanted to see your eyes, Bella. I could not help myself."

"Did you see them?"

"No, not quite." His regret was genuine. She knew he told the truth.

"How could you be so low?"

He tried to look contrite, but it was not a natural expression for him.

"Don't you understand that you have betrayed my trust?" She jumped up and wrapped the sheet around her. "I'm leaving."

He caught her wrist. It was as thin as a child's in his grip. She knew he could make her do anything if he wished. "Stay, Bella. Don't be angry."

"But I am angry!"

"Stay and punish me then, but do not leave."

Though she could not read his eyes, she could see the flaring of his nostrils. Both of them breathed hard and their faces were only inches apart. Despite her better judgment, she wanted him more than she wanted to leave. Mouth dry, she licked her lips. "You can't be trusted."

"No," he agreed.

A wicked idea occurred to her. "If I am to stay, I have to be sure you won't try to remove my mask again."

Dropping the sheet, she plucked her stockings from the floor and stretched them out before her. "Take hold of the bedposts."

Full of masculine assurance, he gave her an indulgent smile and did as he was told. With equal assurance, she quickly bound his wrists to the bedposts. He tested the knots, and some of his confidence faded. "Where did you learn to tie knots?"

She made her smile as sweet as she could. "My grandfather was a seaman, like you."

Not amused, he tried to break free. She laid a gentle hand on his arm. "I have secured your wrists with simple bowlines, but then I used a constrictor knot to tie your wrists to the bedposts. You should know your struggling will only make it tighter, sailor."

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Chapter Five

Dante hated confinement more than anything else. In the past, he had allowed one or two ladies to tie him up with bows, but these were only token restraints, easily slipped—much to the delight of the lady. Bella had tied him in sailor's knots with silk stockings. Even in stocking form, silk made strong cordage. He was at her mercy.

The wench was enjoying her revenge. Splendidly naked, she paced at the side of the bed, apparently considering her next move. As little as he liked his situation, the serpentine swing of her hips fascinated him.

"I want to whip you," she confessed in her throaty whisper. "But I have nothing to do it with and I have tied you the facing wrong way."

"Poor Bella. What will you do instead?"

In answer, she straddled his hips, setting herself down on his growing erection, wiggling a little. Dante clenched his teeth.

"When sailors are bad, they are whipped for it, are they not?"

"Yes, but as you say, you have no whip."

Still pondering, she drew circles on his chest with one finger. He did not have to see her eyes to know she plotted evil. "I've never watched a flogging. What kind of marks does it leave behind?"

Coolly as he could, he gave her the facts. "The whip used for flogging, the cat o' nine tails, leaves marks which look like claw marks."

Fast as the cat itself, she swiped her nails across his chest hard, nearly drawing blood. He jerked against his bonds and she did it again with her other hand, crossing the first claw mark to make an x across his breast. The scratches did not sting. They burned like a brand.

She tossed her head and her lips curled at the corners. "Now you are marked as a traitor, sailor."

Dante cursed and struggled and succeeded only in tightening the knots even more. "When I get out of this—"

She pushed him back down. "You are never going to escape."

Crouching over him like a succubus, she cradled his face and kissed him until he kissed her back. Heat erupted between them, white hot. He sucked her tongue deep in his mouth, trying to possess her any way he could. She broke free and attacked his throat, biting and sucking, grinding herself against him. Dante began to doubt he would live out the day.

"Let me hold you," he gasped.

"If I let you go," she gasped in reply, "you will take me. This time I am taking you."

Like Eve's serpent, she slithered down his chest, licking his nipples, running her hands down his sides, nuzzling his skin, breathing deep. "Bella," he whispered, knowing where she went. His cock grew heavy in anticipation.

Serena had some idea what she was about to do. Prizzi had shown her how on a zucchini, making them both laugh so hard they had cried, but Prizzi had assured her that, strange as it seemed, men liked it very much. She pleased her own lovers that way.

It was not something Serena ever even considered doing with her husband. This man, though, made her want to do all sorts of things. If she had her way, he was going to get more pleasure than he could bear, though he hardly deserved it. It was time for his high-handedness to end.

She curled up with her back to him—why should she let him watch?—and leaned over his hips. On close inspection, her first thought was that it was a strange organ. Her knowledge of Alberenghi's had been very slight. She stroked it between her palms and marveled how it reacted to her touch, growing thicker and harder by the moment, standing up in its dark bed. The head was red, thin-skinned and obviously achingly sensitive. As Prizzi had shown her, she swirled her tongue around the silken tip and tasted the sea. Behind her, he moaned. Encouraged, she took the head in her mouth, sucked, and twirled her tongue some more while her hands caressed the base. His rich, animal smell imprinted itself on her mind along with his taste and his heat. Curious, she reached between his legs and cupped his testicles. These were equally strange and very delicate by all reports. She rolled them in her palm while she took him deep into her mouth and sucked up the length of him. Underneath her arm, his hips lifted.

"Dear God, Bella, I need to be inside of you. Now!"

The rawness of his voice made Serena glance back at him. He hung against his bonds, his arms bulging, his neck tight. The headboard creaked in protest, but did not give.

Chewing her lip, she looked back at his cock. Straining in her hand, shining wet, it seemed impossibly large. What was she going to do with it now?

Dante writhed in agony. The wench—the witch!—pondered his request for an eternity before straddling him once again, only this time she faced his feet. He wanted to see her face, her breasts. All he could see was her full, heart-shaped ass, which, after a moment or two, he decided was not the worst of fates. She groped him, brought him between her legs and searched for her opening, sliding his swollen head back and forth along her shining cleft.

He forced himself to focus on the ceiling and calculate currency conversions. After an eternity of torturous groping, fiddling and wiggling, in which she laughed more than once, she found what she sought and lowered herself on him. He stopped calculating and gaped. She was leaning forward and driving back against him. In that position, he could see her wet, pouting sex between her round white cheeks and himself buried in her. Never had he seen anything more arousing.

Loose limbed and languid, she began to post, rising and falling along his length, lost in her own pleasure. As much as he enjoyed the view, Dante wanted to touch her, he wanted to see her face, he wanted her to talk to him. In fact, he realized he had become wildly jealous of his own cock. Something inside him snapped.

"Bella, when I get loose I am going to spank that fine ass of yours. I am going to turn you over my knee and paddle it until you are red. Do you understand?"

As if waking from a dream, she stopped her ride. His heart pounded wildly, expectantly. As he wanted, she shifted around to face him. He swallowed and closed his eyes with relief as she slipped him back into her silken heat.

Leaning forward, she asked in her velvet whisper, "What else are you going to do to me?"

Dante very nearly shamed himself then and there. Trying to ignore her slow, sucking slide, he retreated into his imagination.

"After I spank you, I am going to flip you on your back and eat you until you until you beg for mercy, and when you can beg no more, I will continue to suck you and lick you until you lose your mind. I do not lie, Bella! When I am done, you will be so useless that someone will have to feed you!"

The sultry smile appeared under the mask and her head lolled to one side. Rocking her hips slowly, she touched one finger to each hard nipple. "Go on."

Dante took long, slow breaths through his nose. In a tight voice he continued, "And when you are sopping wet, aching, swollen, I am going to fuck you, *cara* Bella, fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk for days."

Losing her languor, she planted her hands on either side of his head and thrust hard against him. "Like this?"

Snarling, he braced his feet and plunged deep. She grunted a little and dropped her head. Moving as one, they thrust faster and faster, speeding right along the cliff's edge.

"No, not like this," he managed to rasp. "I am going to take you from behind, so I can see your fine ass and my red handprints on it."

"Ah!" Her cry was one of pure amazement. She threw her head back and then pitched forward in violent spasms.

At her cry, Dante jerked beneath her. He cried out in agony, trapped in the throes of release stronger than any he had ever known. It was as if he ejaculated his very soul. There was nothing left of him.

* * * *

Much later, when Serena found the strength to peel herself off his chest, she gave him a cautious kiss, expecting he might bite her. Instead, he answered with a lush, long kiss of his own.

"Do you feel good?" she murmured against his lips. "Better than you've ever felt in your life?"

His chest shook with silent laughter and his words slurred together as if he were drunk. "Woman, I do believe you nearly killed me."

Fondly, she rubbed her chin against the bristles on his cheek and then climbed off of him. For a moment, she paused to admire his beautiful, sprawling, sated body.

"Untie me now, Bella."

"Just a moment, love." She slipped her shift over her head, went to the door, shouted "Prizzi!", and returned to the bed to drape the sheets over his hips. By that time he was no longer quite so languid.

"What are you doing?" he growled.

"Do you think I would loose you on me after what you threatened to do?" Smiling, she chucked his chin. "I have to go home now."

He understood what that meant. "Let me go!"

The bedposts creaked as he tried to fight his way free. She hoped they would not snap.

Keeping her voice light and even, she said, "I will be dressed in a moment with Prizzi's help, and then we will send Luigi up with a sharp knife. Those knots will have to be cut off."

"Damn it to hell! This is not funny!"

"It is you who misbehaved today, not I."

They were interrupted by scratching at the door. Dante ground his teeth as she let in a regal African woman, a woman tall enough to have been the "man" the night before. The maid gave no indication that she noticed him trussed up on the bed. She dressed her mistress with brisk motions, saying nothing except once, "Stockings?"

Bella shook her head, and had the decency to color a little. The maid buckled her shoes onto bare feet.

At the door, Bella said, "Luigi will be right up."

"I will have my vengeance, you know I will."

The smile curled up her lips, and then grew wider, until she positively beamed. "I hope you do, sailor."

Dismayed by his own weakness, Dante begged.
"Tomorrow? Here?"

"I'll think about it."

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Chapter Six

Late the next morning, Serena woke from sensual dreams. Stretching, she smiled to herself, very content. Light danced on her walls, reflected from the water beneath her window. She loved that about her house. She loved the plaster garlands decorating her ceiling and the long, billowing curtains in sea water blues and greens that swamped her bed and windows. For a minute, she reveled in a sense of great happiness and well-being. Then she remembered who was visiting that morning and pulled the covers over her face.

Prizzi danced into the room with a cup of chocolate for Serena and one for herself as well. "How is the most dangerous woman in Venice?"

"Glorious until a moment ago. Then I remembered Valaresso is coming."

Prizzi made a sympathetic face. "What do you want to wear?"

"My full widow's uniform, I think. I want to remind him of my husband and his father. I want to seem as pathetic as possible."

"Perhaps you should wear something a little more fetching. As we know, you do have some influence over men."

Serena laughed. "One man, maybe, and only if I tie him down. Otherwise I am hopeless. I cannot flirt to save my life, much less my home."

By ten o' clock, she was waiting for Valaresso in the salon. It was hopeless to try to do anything else. Prizzi sat with her

until eleven, but then had to go run errands before the noon hour. Serena rearranged the pillows on the gilded furniture, fussed with the flowers on the mantle, picked up a novel, put it down again, smoothed her wide black skirts and fluffed the black ruffles which ran from her chin to her waist.

It truly was a hideous dress. It swallowed her in its grim blackness and reduced her face to an insignificant blur. An itchy cap of black lace perched on her head, and beneath, her hair was arranged high and powdered white. Her gloves were of black netting. A very proper, pious widow she made. At least on the outside. Serena scratched powder from her nose and fidgeted, fingering her rosary.

The first she knew of his arrival was the sound of heels clicking in the marble hall. Before he was announced, she had just enough time to plunge the novel behind the couch cushions. It was not an entirely respectable book. When Valaresso made his grand entrance, she raised her eyebrows. He was more handsome than she expected. His father, Arturo, had not been handsome at all. He had been a tall man, a strong man, and his son took after him in that way. The looks, she surmised, must come from his mother's side. A little flutter of desire went through her in those first seconds, much to her chagrin. A rush of mindless attraction to a man who was handsome, who knew he was handsome, and worse, knew how it affected women. His eyes alone could stun. Large, dark and compelling, they were fringed in thick lashes and framed by winging black brows. His white wig made both his eyes and skin appear even darker than they already they were, almost exotic.

As he made his bow, she took in his clothing. Whatever he chased after or transported in his ships rewarded him well, for he was dressed like a prince. His long waistcoat was fashioned of amber silk, richly embroidered and closed with a double row of pearl buttons. Over it he wore a full skirted coat of olive velvet which matched his breeches. Snowy white lace cascaded around his neck and wrists. Striking a courtly pose, he said, "I trust this morning finds you well, Signora Alberenghi?"

"Thank the Lord, yes, I am quite well. Please have a seat, Signore Valaresso. May I offer you something?"

"Thank you, Signora, but I want for nothing."

Of course you don't, Serena thought, and wondered how long their politeness would last. He offered his regrets over her husband's passing. She condoled him over his father. Together they admired the long friendship of the two men. Miserable, she asked, "How goes your moving in? My servants tell me the lower floors swarm like a hive."

"Very well, thank you. Fortunately my man supervises the operation, leaving me free to conduct other business." His self-satisfied smile reminded her of her lover. How she wished she could be in their rented room at Luigi's that moment.

Wishing to hurry the interview along, she plunged forward. "Regarding your letter, Signore."

He interrupted her with an elegant, careless gesture, "I do assure you, Signora Alberenghi, that I am entirely eager to make the transition as easy for you as possible. In fact, I will place all my resources at your disposal."

"That is kind of you." she returned coolly. The man was a pompous ass. Yet somehow his deep, rich voice reminded her of her scoundrel. "I wonder if you understand, Signore Valaresso, that your father intended my husband and I to live here in perpetuity."

"I understand that my father outlived your husband, and so kept his promise to him. My father left no instruction for me regarding you or regarding this place at all."

Serena shifted in her seat. Not only was this conversation unpleasant, but now she was beginning to fancy he resembled her lover. Though she tried to keep her mind on the conversation, she could not stop the pieces from coming together. His voice, the shape of his lips, his hands, his height, they were all so familiar. Then again, the man she knew was not so affected, so foppish, and certainly not so rich. Even more reassuring, he gave no sign of recognizing her at all. In fact, he looked straight through her. As they spoke, his eyes wandered the room, taking in the architectural detail, no doubt imagining the changes he would make as soon as she was out. Serena pushed the resemblance from her mind and regrouped.

"Signore Valaresso, please lend a widow your sympathy." She extended her hands in supplication. "I love my home and have no desire to leave it. Would you consider leasing this apartment to me for another year? I would pay more than fair market value for the privilege."

For a brief moment, he was surprised enough to actually look her in the eye. She hated his eyes for being so fascinating, hated the seductive way the lashes lowered and

then raised again as again as he began to speak. "I am curious, Signora. Why do you wish to stay here another year?"

She clipped her response into a warning. "That is no concern of yours."

His gaze drifted back to the windows. "But surely you have relations who will take you in until you marry again?"

"That has nothing to do with my request, Signore." She clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes at him. What demon of ill-fortune had brought this man into her life?

Taking on a confidential air, he leaned forward and said, "Certainly you must know how unusual it is for a young widow to live by herself. For you to continue living alone will only invite speculation on your character. And to live alone above me will only hasten those speculations." His smile was full of suggestion, and so familiar it stopped her heart. But it was not him. It could not be.

"My character is none of your concern." Serena's voice cracked and she clutched her rosary, sinking her hands into her skirts.

He did not even seem to notice her distress. Instead he leaned back and crossed his legs. "I am afraid it is. There is living alone, and there is living alone. I assumed you at least kept some kind of companion with you." He paused to scan the room as if he hoped to find an elderly relation propped in a corner. "But it seems you do not. This prevents me from moving in as I planned."

Serena had little patience for such niceties. "Signore Valaresso, we do not share a house. We live in separate

apartments with separate doors. If proximity is a sin, then the entire city sins. I hardly fear for my reputation."

"You live under my roof. That is all people need to know for the gossip to begin."

"Is your own reputation as dubious as that?"

He made a show of straightening his cuffs, then looked straight at her. "Pray you don't find out, Signora Alberenghi."

Serena swallowed a cry. That unrepentant wickedness, that crooked smile. Her head swam and she barely heard what he said next.

"Very well. You are here, I am here. We must make do until you leave. I have already hired a staff. They must stay. I will have to come and go to some extent, to pick up clothes and direct my affairs, but I will do so as discreetly as possible. I will sleep elsewhere, most likely on my ship."

"That is absurd," she said through numb lips. "Sleep wherever you like."

"Do you have a maiden aunt or some such who will come and stay with you?"

"No, I do not." The last thing she needed was a nosy aunt about the house.

"Then I must stay elsewhere." His voice was as clipped as hers.

Serena pinched the bridge of her nose. She had to set aside her mounting hysteria and do what she set out to do—buy herself more time.

"Signore Valaresso," she began. She had to pause to take a breath before continuing. "That is most inconvenient for you. Perhaps we can come to an agreement. Extend my lease

as I asked and perhaps I can find a maiden aunt to live with me. Then you can live in comfort below."

He chuckled. "That would be a bold stroke of negotiation, Signora, if you had a leg to stand on. But you do not. You remain here at my pleasure. Rest assured I can wait two months, but a year?" He shook his head in hollow regret and spun his wrist in an elegant gesture. "A year is out of the question."

Then once more he was leaning toward her, insinuating himself. Lord, he was good at it.

"You see, I have been at sea for many years, and now I have come back to stay. I plan to marry soon, Signora." He smiled as if that news should please her. "I need a home large enough to hold my family and friends, and impressive enough to promote my business. I must have the entire house at my disposal as soon as possible. Surely you will understand the naturalness of my desire to make my life here, and I apologize if my plans interfere with any of yours."

I have been at sea. They were both sailors, both recently arrived in Venice.

"I understand." Her stomach churned, and she thought she might be sick. Desperate to be alone, she stood and dismissed him. "Good day, Signore Valaresso."

He flicked a dark eyebrow at her, but rose without hurry and put his hat on, adjusting it to just the right tilt. As he did, his lace cuffs fell back and she saw that the skin around his wrists was chafed raw.

Darkness closed around her like a sucking tide.

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Chapter Seven

Serena knew she was a coward. If she had any spirit at all, she would march straight down to Luigi's in her widow's uniform, watch the smug expression drop from Valaresso's face, and then kick him in the balls. But self-pity weighed her down, along with shame and a measure of fear. She could not predict how he might react to the truth. Would he laugh at her? Would he be disgusted by her easy virtue? The urge to hide from him was as strong as her desire to throttle him. So she took to her bed.

"Oh, Prizzi, I can't believe I gave myself to that vain, selfish—" At a loss for words, she fell back against her pillows. He was exactly the kind of man she hated most, a man who believed he was put on earth as a gift to all womankind.

After she'd fainted, he'd picked her up off the floor and laid her on the couch. She had questioned the chambermaid closely about this. Even while holding her in his arms, he'd not managed to recognize her. It was unbelievable. And he did not even have the courtesy to wait and see if she required further assistance. Instead he'd run away, telling the chambermaid to pass on something about his hopes for her speedy recovery.

The revelation of his true colors would almost be a blessing if it did not come on the heels of disaster. The awful man was throwing her out of her home, destroying her happiness, and her career, just to satisfy his own vanity. The lower

apartment was simply not good enough for him. It was not large enough to accommodate his swollen head.

"It is not as if I asked him to live in a stinking hole."

"Pardon?" Prizzi asked, looking up from her sewing.

"I said, the lower apartment would be good enough for anyone who did not need to prove he was a prince of the city."

"That is true enough. I would never turn my nose up at it." Wearing a dreamy expression, Prizzi began to list the virtues of the lower apartment. She had a marked taste for the finer things in life. "Gilded plasterwork, parquet floors the Doge himself would envy, the ceiling mural in the dining room alone..." she trailed off, sighing.

"It is a jewel, that's what it is," Serena said. "But it's not enough for him, not even for a single year. Not even for the sake of the widow of his father's best friend."

The terribly inconvenient widow of his father's best friend. Why couldn't she cart herself off to her relations and not be such a bother? Didn't she know that widows were just so much excess furniture to be passed down to whichever branch of the family had the room to store them? Awful man.

His first remarks about it being improper for them to live in the same building smacked of the condescending flirtation that young men used on women too old to interest them. Then, when she did not respond with grateful simpers and obliging agreement, he actually threatened her. "Pray you don't find out, Signora Alberenghi." Was that comment meant to frighten her into submission? Hateful man.

Valaresso had said he was going to marry. Most likely he had already secured a fat young virgin with an even fatter dowry and was lining up his mistresses. In the meanwhile, he entertained himself with a little something he picked up on the streets. Her. Clearly she could not attract him unless she wore a mask—and little else. It stood to reason. What would the cock of the walk want with an aging widow? All he found attractive in her as a lover was the fact that she was convenient. Extremely convenient.

And that was nobody's fault but her own. No one forced her to go out whoring.

She kicked the sheets and fumed. That truth was hardest to live with. She covered her face with a pillow and wondered, was it possible to smother oneself?

Like a dog licking a wound, she could not help but return to her sorest point. He had not recognized her at all. Not one bit. Even a single quizzical look or a passing confusion would have been some comfort.

"I know his hands, Prizzi. His smile, his voice, his stance, everything."

Prizzi nodded. "You were his lover."

"Then why did he not know me?"

"Men are stupid that way. They don't see anything unless it interests them."

All along she had been nothing to him but a pair of spread legs. To think she had feared she might be falling in love with him!

In a sudden explosion of rage, she threw her teacup against the armoire, smashing it to bits. She did not weep. At

least she did not do that. She would not weep for him, and she would do her best never to see him again.

* * * *

Dante waited that entire afternoon at Luigi's for Bella, but she did not show. Most likely she could not escape her house without notice. Or maybe she wanted to give him another day to cool down. It did not worry him. He did not doubt she would come the next day. A woman with appetites like hers was guaranteed to come looking for more of what pleased her. He had almost forgiven her for tying him up and was greatly diverted devising ways to pay her back in kind.

The thought of her made him smile. He laughed at himself and admitted the truth. The thought of her made him hard. No woman had ever thrilled him so much. She was a pretty little thing, but he had known women more beautiful than her. It was her imagination that captured him. It was very like his own, God help them both.

At four o' clock he gave up and went down to the tavern for a drink and some dinner. "Your little bosun didn't show?" Luigi asked as he dried a stack of mugs.

Dante snorted and lowered his face into his own mug. On a ship, the bosun was in charge of the ship's rigging. Dante knew well that he would never live down yesterday's exploits or forget how hard Luigi had laughed before cutting him free. He could do that now that Dante was no longer his captain. "She'll come tomorrow," he said. "You see, she's not exactly free to come and go."

"Oh, ho." The barman touched the side of his nose and said no more. That is, until he turned to shelve his mugs and added, as if to himself, "The girl can tie a knot."

Dante's thoughts drifted toward the widow Alberenghi, no matter how much he wished not to think of her. If Bella had come to him, he would not be plagued now by recurring visions of the good widow crumpling into a pile of black wool at his feet.

Undoubtedly he was a very bad man for wishing his house to himself. It was a shocking notion. Scowling, he stabbed at his food and shoveled it in his mouth. *Undoubtedly* it was also unfair of him to end ten years of practically free occupancy in one of the finest locations in Venice for the Alberenghi family. How could he be so selfish? Lifting his knife, he used it to emphasize his next point to his invisible audience of sympathizers. Why was it his role to remind a woman of her age, a respectable, religious widow, that she should not live alone? Personally, he did not care so much if she did. If she wished, she could live alone and naked in a belfry, but for some reason she wanted to live in his house.

"Why is she under my skin?" She was just a little dried up widow, the kind that crowded church pews. Not old at all, but old-acting. All he remembered of her was a general impression of paleness and sour, indistinct features framed by black ruffles. For a woman, she had a particularly deep voice, as if she had a cold. It had struck him as disagreeable. More than anything, he remembered her disapproval of him, something bordering on disgust, palpable in the air. Perhaps

that is why she haunted him. He liked women to like him, even unpleasant widows.

* * * *

"Would you mind living in lesser quarters, Prizzi, if it meant we could stay in Venice?"

Prizzi put down her book. She was fond of sitting in the window and reading while Serena painted. Serena painted in the brightest, best room in the house, and when she worked, the room was as peaceful as a church. "Lesser how? I am not fond of cows, but rats are worse."

Serena tried to smile, but only succeeded in lifting one corner of her mouth. Since waking, she had been trying to think of some way to salvage this miserable situation. She could not afford to spend another day in bed feeling sorry for herself. "The will does not leave Alberenghi's money to my sole discretion, but I think we could live on the personal allowance the lawyers give me and Lombardo's sales, if we found a modest place. The only problem is that we would need a man to stand in for us with the landlord."

"Paolo would do that for us, you know he would."

Serena sighed at the notion of having a footman stand assurance for her, but it would have to do. "Of course I would lose my views and so could not finish the series showing the four seasons. Carosi will be angry, for I have promised him this series, and I think he already has a buyer." She sighed. "But what choice do I have?"

"Do you really think your father would allow you live in some canal shack?"

"No, but when does he visit? Even if he were not so busy, his gout would keep him at home. I will just write that I am staying on, hint that I am husband hunting, and drag the ruse out as long as I can."

"Honestly Serena, I think the best way for you to stay in Venice is to secure a husband over the next two months and marry him as soon as you are out of mourning."

"Impossible. What husband would be as understanding of my painting as Alberenghi? What other man would give me so much freedom? And besides, no man wanting an heir would marry me."

"An old one might not mind your habits and might already have children. All he'd want was you to sit on his lap now and then and look pretty for his friends."

Serena shuddered. "I have had enough of old men. No, I have had enough with men altogether. I would rather go back to Lombardy than tie myself down again. I will paint cow after cow, and if I can't sell them, I'll hang them all in your room."

* * * *

When Bella did not appear the second day, Dante tried not to worry. The old man, as he preferred to imagine his rival, was probably making more demands on her than usual, but even so, she could have sent her maid with a note.

Each day, he was busy setting up his warehouses, hiring men, meeting with city officials, declining as many social invitations as practicable out of the floods of envelopes that came his way, but whenever he did not absolutely have to attend to something else, his thoughts would inevitably drift

back to her and her many virtues as a lover. He was as smitten as a schoolboy.

After much pleasant reflection, he decided that it was not her imagination that captured him as much as her directness. She was not coy. She did not flirt. She did not hold herself back in any way. If he pleased her, he knew it. If he failed to please her, she would never pretend he had. If she wanted something, she took it. It was as if she had been raised by wolves and had no idea of how a fashionable woman should behave.

It was as if she had no idea how a mistress should behave.

That thought gave him pause, but he shook off his doubts and held on to his "bored mistress" hypothesis. First, she had admitted she was just that. Second, he needed her to be someone's mistress, or similarly available, because the next time they met he was going to propose to bring her under his protection.

She implied that her man was powerful, but unless she belonged to the Doge of Venice himself, it didn't matter. No amount of money or trouble would be too much to secure her. If he had to fight him for her, he would. It made his stomach churn to imagine a woman of such spirit trapped under the thumb of some man who did not care for her.

He wondered how she came to be kept. She did not have the jaded air of a woman who fought her way into that position. More likely she came to it against her will. Her accent was not native Venetian. It was tempered by Venice, but had rural peculiarities. Her refined manners told him she came from a good family, or at least had acted as a high

servant in a good family. Only ill-fortune would land a girl like that in a bad situation. Perhaps her father was in debt to this man and she was used to pay the debt. Or maybe she had no father at all and she supported her family through this arrangement.

It did not matter. Those days were behind her. He would set her up in a little place of her own and they would have no more of this sneaking about or uncertainty. Try as he might, he could not suppress the wide smile that took over his face whenever he thought of Bella, his woman from the streets, his perfect mistress. The woman who kept him from missing the sea.

His good mood was extraordinary considering how bad his luck had been of late. Nothing had gone right since his interview with the widow Alberenghi. In the day since, he had stained his favorite coat, inexplicably fallen out with his bookkeeper and lost a small fortune at the faro table. On the way to the tavern, a little dog lifted its leg on his ankle, and then to crown it all, no Bella.

It was as if the widow had laid a curse on him. He resolved to work himself back into his neighbor's good graces. Without, of course, actually giving her what she wanted.

* * * *

The next day, as he tried to work in his study, Dante was treated to the sight of dozens of lilies, hyacinths and roses plummeting past his window. The entire bouquet of flowers he had just sent upstairs floated on the surface of the water like a watery garden. His note expressing nothing but sincere

wishes for the widow's good health fluttered down after them. He glared at the ceiling. The day before, he had tried to call on her to make amends. She was not at home to him. So he sent her a letter expressing his apologies if his visit had distressed her and offered his services to her once again. That letter had been returned unopened. Now the flowers.

The woman was certainly mad. More, he was sure she had cursed him. It had to be the evil eye. Three days had passed and still no Bella. Every part of him ached for her. He feared he might go mad himself from wanting. One of his servants sat at the tavern to watch for her all day, every day.

Deciding he needed outside assistance to lift the widow's curse, Dante called on Marissa Da Ponte. Marissa was one of the best hostesses in town and had been more than kind to him when he was a young man. She knew everyone and everything.

"Dante!" Beaming, she floated toward him, arms out in her theatrical style, and kissed him on both cheeks. It was still easy to see how beautiful she once was. "We all thought you had been swallowed by a whale." She gave him a saucy look up and down. "Have you grown?"

"Only in the important ways." Smiling, he kissed her hand.

She tapped his head with her fan. "You ought to kiss more than my hand. How long have you been in town without visiting me? Everyone knows you are back, but hardly anyone has seen you. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Around the port, mostly. I am overwhelmed by work."

"I have never known you to neglect pleasure, no matter how hard you work. What else keeps you away from society?"

"Mamas," he winked. "Mamas pushing their daughters at me from all sides."

"Ah," Marissa laughed, "now that I can believe."

"Did carrier pigeons fly in ahead of the ship to announce I intended to marry? I don't know how else they could have found out and formed such intricate battle plans so quickly."

"You are the talk of the town, *caro*. How you've returned to restore the Valaresso fortune and the Valaresso line." She flipped open her fan and fluttered her eyelashes at him from behind it. "Can you blame the mamas for trying?"

"I cannot. One of their girls will most likely be my wife soon enough. Just now, though, I can't stand to be the center of so much attention." He had not even realized how much it bothered him until he said it aloud. "That's the truth of it, Marissa. It wears me down."

With a gentle smile, Marissa took his hand and pressed it between hers. "The younger Dante would have taken full advantage of his popularity. I think I can safely say that you have grown since you've been gone."

"I've grown feral, more like." It was a joke, but it did not sound like one. Grimacing he added, "I've spent too much time at sea."

"Well, you are right to marry as soon as you can. A good woman will remind you that Venice is your home, and perhaps even tame your wandering ways."

Their conversation drifted to mutual acquaintances. Dante waited some time before deciding it safe to ask, "Do you know the widow Alberenghi?"

Marissa stared at him, puzzled, and then her eyes cleared. "Oh, you mean Serena. Serena Alberenghi. Your neighbor." She lifted an eyebrow. "Why, are you interested in her?"

"Oh, no." The idea! "It is only that I am afraid I have offended her. Tell me, is she known for being vindictive?"

"Serena is a darling girl." Marissa protested with wave of her hand. Now he began to wonder if they spoke of the same woman. Then again, Marissa tended to exaggerate her praises. "She's shy, but I would never call her ill-tempered. In fact, after tending her husband through his final months, I would call her an angel."

Dante rubbed his forehead, his nagging headache—part of the curse—growing worse by the moment. "Then perhaps grief has put her off balance?"

"I shouldn't think so. Alberenghi was ages older than her. You know how it goes, he had her shipped in from the country young in hopes of getting an heir at the last minute." Her shrug encompassed the foolishness of men. "She served him well, but she did not love him, not that way. How could she? And besides, who is surprised when an old man dies?" Marissa gave him a little poke in the leg with the toe of her pink satin shoe. "Just what are you fishing for, Dante?"

So he told her everything about his letter, their interview, the flowers, the curse, knowing there was no way to tell Marissa just a little of anything. At the end, he said, "And do you think I am so terrible for wanting my house back?"

"It is your house, pet," she cooed, patting him on the knee. He suspected she was not entirely sincere.

"And why, why, does the woman want to stay there all by herself?"

Marissa leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on a tufted stool. "I know I would not want to leave Venice and go back to the farm. Her father lives in the depths of Lombardy."

"But you agree it is hardly proper for her to live completely alone."

"Yes, yes, of course." Marissa mused. "If I were her I would be looking for a new husband who would keep me in Venice. Maybe she has one in mind already and that is why she needs more time from you."

"That makes sense ... I suppose." Dante found it difficult to imagine that sour little widow stringing in a man, but anything was possible.

"Why not marry her yourself, Dante? She needs a husband, you need a wife, and you already live in the same house." Laughing at the conceit, she tapped his knee with her fan, then added, "You know, I am only half joking."

Dante's head began to throb outright. Lacking any sense of humor, he said, "Marissa, there is no way in hell I am going to marry Alberenghi's widow. All I want is for the woman to take her curse off me. I want to make up to her, charm her a little so she does not think me a monster. I want her to cooperate with me and find herself a companion, so that I can at least sleep under my own roof. I tell you it is very unpleasant as we are. I swear the woman sits upstairs invoking demons to plague me. I can scarcely stand to be in my own house for five minutes."

"Poor lamb," she tutted. "Tell me how I can help you."

"Could you put together one of your dinners and invite both of us?"

"And I will just happen to forget to mention to her that you are on the guest list? Is it your plan to trap her somewhere she cannot easily escape, out among company, so she can't bludgeon you?"

"An efficient, if brutal, summary of my plan, Marissa. If I can have just a few words with her, I am sure I can turn this around."

"Anything for you, caro. But it will have to be in the next few days, because Lent is almost upon us. Everyone has parties to go to, but I should be able to scrape a few souls up. It has to be an intimate dinner anyway, because of her mourning."

Marissa fell into planning, throwing out possible names to him, but he barely listened. All he knew was that his head hurt, and that he had to be free of this curse.

* * * *

Marissa Da Ponte's invitation was so kindly worded, so full of concern for her, that Serena could not refuse it, no matter how little she felt like socializing. Besides, once in Lombardy, she would no longer have the option of dining with elegant, witty people like Marissa Da Ponte and her circle, so thought she may as well enjoy them while she could. Prizzi still held out hope that she would find a husband and keep them in Venice, and so took extra care dressing her that night. Prizzi's enthusiastic lacing pushed her breasts nearly to her chin.

Serena frowned at her in the mirror. Prizzi was unrepentant. "We must enhance your assets."

At least they agreed on the gown—there was not much choice in the matter. At her husband's death, she had ordered two mourning gowns. The first was the high-necked affair she wore to church and that she had worn to meet the loathsome Valaresso. The second gown was more to her taste and a little less respectable. She'd had no occasion to wear it before, for Marissa's was the first evening invitation she had accepted since being widowed. It was black, of course, but shining, lustrous black, cut low in front and back, tight and very simple through the bodice and elbow-length sleeves. Serena knew her slight frame could not support any quantity of bows and frippery, and the low cut kept the black away from her face so she did not fade beneath it. The skirts were not so simple, being richly crimped and gathered into many cascading layers. Broad panniers spread the skirts dramatically off either side of her hips, so far out, in fact, that Serena had to turn sideways just to pass through a doorway. Skirts this broad were ridiculous, but they were the latest fashion from Paris, and she had to admit her waist appeared twice as slender rising from the center.

Prizzi arranged Serena's hair high, leaving a few tendrils around her nape which she curled into loose spirals with an iron. They agreed not to powder it. She wore no paint and a crucifix set with pearls, a gift from her husband, was her only ornament. Serena inspected the final effect in the standing mirror. Nervously, she pressed her hands to her stomach. "I have never gone out alone, Prizzi."

"Yes, you have," Prizzi countered, standing a little behind her with her arms crossed, amused.

"I've gone to visit other wives by myself, yes, but never alone at night in mixed company."

"I say again you have."

Remembering the night she met Valaresso, Serena blushed from her breasts up. Seeing it in the mirror made her blush more deeply. "And you see where that led? I think now I do not want to go."

"I won't let you turn coward after I've spent three hours dressing you." Prizzi called for a glass of sherry.

* * * *

Dante stepped in from the balcony after a pleasant smoke with Marissa's husband. Checking the room for the widow, his eyes immediately latched on a mass of black skirts. But as his eyes traveled upward he saw a slender waist, a straight back, a long neck and red-gold hair. Hair like Bella's. Suspecting he was dreaming, that deprivation made him see things, he took one careful step forward. The woman headed toward Marissa. He recognized her walk, the sway of her hips, the set of her shoulders. Bella. His blood hummed in recognition. The widow forgotten, his mind raced ahead to find an excuse to get Bella alone with him as soon as possible, preferably behind a locked door.

Marissa spotted him approaching and waved him over. *Bless you, Marissa.* Would Bella recognize him straight off? He could not wait to see her eyes.

"Dante, my dear," Marissa said as he rounded her side, "I doubt I need to introduce you to your neighbor, Signora Alberenghi."

Her eyes—her eyes were blue, blue as the sea he loved—narrowed at him in disgust. All the color drained from her face.

"You!" he gasped. Understanding came to him like a punch in the gut.

"Now you see?" It was the widow's voice, not Bella's velvet whisper. Part of him noticed Marissa slipping away. The rest of him reeled, trying to absorb what stood in front of him. She did not give him much time.

"Why do you recognize me tonight? Did you need these," she clapped her hands over her breasts, "to spur your memory?"

The widow's crucifix swung between those lovely breasts, confusing him, fascinating him. Dante ripped his eyes away, and said, "No, Bella."

"Do not 'Bella' me, Signore Valaresso."

He spread his hands. "How was I to know?"

"How could you not know?" Her eyes gleamed with tears. "I'm just grateful that I found out the truth about you ... before..." Choking back a sob, she spun around and ran from him. He caught her arm, but she shook it free and he dared not be any more forceful with her for every person in the room already gaped at them. Marissa intercepted her, offered her a handkerchief and escorted her away.

Dante straightened his coat and cast a threatening glance around the room. Conversation resumed—loud, unnatural

conversation. Dante felt surrounded, like a beast on display. A very astute servant brought him a glass of wine and he downed it in one swallow. Marissa would calm Bella down and then he would go to her and apologize, let her whip him, whatever she wanted, and all would be well, somehow.

A shocked chant ran through his mind. *Bella is the widow. The widow is Bella.* How was it possible? What did it mean? As stunned as he was, he could barely scratch two thoughts together. One by one, some basic conclusions drifted forward. Bella was a member of his own class. Bella was a widow, and therefore marriageable. Dante coughed and gestured for another glass of wine. There was more. Bella had lied to him about everything. The pieces fell together. Oh, how she had lied!

Marissa reappeared, smiling opaquely at the other guests. Low and urgent, Dante asked, "May I go to her?"

Shooting him the sharpest look she'd ever given him, she asked, "What are you playing at, Dante?"

"Nothing! Just let me go to her."

"You can't," Marissa said. "She has gone home, and certainly will not see you again tonight."

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Chapter Eight

Dante called for his gondola to pursue her home, but the Grand Canal was clogged with boats. Unable to stand still and do nothing while his man shouted at the other gondoliers and made creeping progress, he demanded to be put ashore in defiance of all common sense, for the streets were worse. Lent was only twenty-seven hours away. The streets were packed with people, all drunk as wheelbarrows and enjoying every conceivable sin and indulgence they could before that cold dawning. Ordinarily Dante would be one of them. That night he felt as if he was fighting through the halls of hell.

"Get out of my way!" he shouted into the din, shoving his way through the seething crowd. He needed to see her again, for until he did, he could not make himself believe it was true. It was like a nightmare or a bad joke. The lace at his wrists caught everything imaginable, from sword hilts to sedan chairs. His hat fell off and was lost underfoot. Someone, or something, grabbed the skirts of his coat, restraining him. He didn't even turn to look, he just slipped out of it and kept moving. For good measure, he threw off his wig, which he hated anyway.

Once home, he took the stairs two steps at a time, bounding straight to the Alberenghis' door. He tried the handle first. It was locked. Resisting the urge to pound and shout, he knocked politely. A long wait followed and then a little chambermaid opened the door a crack.

"I'm sorry, but the Signora..."

With his open palm, he shoved the door open and strode in, ignoring the maid's scream, proceeding directly to the salon where he had first met the widow Alberenghi. There she was, just home herself by the looks of it, consoling with her regal lady's maid. Flaming bright, she walked straight up to him, finger pointing to the door. "Out! Get out of my house!"

Pointing just as emphatically to the floor, he roared, "This is my house!"

A burly footman holding a baton stepped into his line of vision and said, "Signore, my lady has asked you to leave."

Dante turned his head and saw that the footman was backed up by a she-cook armed with a cleaver and two maids with candlesticks. He looked back at Bella—the widow, the witch—who folded her arms and raised her chin at him provokingly.

Leaping to her side, he drew his dress sword and pointed it at her champions, moving it in a slow arc before their faces. "I have not come to hurt your lady or any of you." As he spoke, he secured Bella's arm so she could not escape. "Shall we go somewhere more private to talk, *cara*?" he asked, keeping his eyes particularly on the mustachioed cook with the cleaver. The woman had certainly killed before.

Bella pulled against his grip. "I have nothing to say to you."

"But I have plenty to say to you." All of the skin prickled on the back of Dante's neck. It was a sensation that had saved him many times before. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw her maid creeping up on him, vase in hand. "My dear, please put that down and come around front with the others."

To emphasize his words, he pulled Bella to his chest and held her there. Her woman did as she was told.

"This has gone too far, Signora Alberenghi," he said into her ear. "Call them off and talk to me." Under his forearm, he felt a slight softening of her spine, a sign of resignation. As evidence of good faith, he let her go.

"Thank you all." She smiled tremulously at her staff. "The Signore and I will speak alone now."

A pair of doors stood at Dante's back. In the apartment below, they led to the study. He assumed the same would be true here. Taking her arm, he propelled her through the doors, ignoring the dragging of her heels.

Her chambermaids trotted in behind them with candelabra to light the room and left immediately, closing the doors as they went.

"What is this place?" he asked, turning in a slow circle.

The change in environment was so abrupt, so unexpected, that for a moment it distracted him from his anger. He saw a sturdy easel with a painting resting on it. The painting was draped with a cloth. Other paintings, unframed, hung on the walls alongside sketches and finished drawings. The only chair in the room sat in front of the easel. A small work table holding a palette and a jar of brushes sat next to the chair. Another table, a massive one, stood against the far wall. The table looked as if it belonged to an alchemist, because it was lined with delicate scales, beakers and vials, mortars and pestles, and mysterious jars full of colored powder and glistening oils.

The entire scene made no sense to him. He stood in an artist's studio. Had old Alberenghi painted? This room did not look like a dilettante's play room. It had an air of real work about it, and recent work at that. It smelled of pungent solvents, warm resin, and ... he sniffed again to be sure ... linseed oil.

All this while she had not answered his question, but stood stiff, quivering, gripping the back of the chair. Frowning, he turned to the paintings on the wall. They were all different views from the windows of the palazzo, mostly taken from the windows of that very room, beautifully rendered and full of charming detail.

He had admired a similar painting at a friend's house just a few days ago, thinking at the time that the view was very similar to the one from Ca' Valaresso. His friend had bragged about how fortunate he was to have secured a work by the artist known as the "new Canaletto," Piero Lombardo. Thinking aloud, he said, "These look like the work of Piero Lombardo."

Her natural voice, a low alto, still surprised him. "They *are* the work of Piero Lombardo."

Turning to face her, another question on his lips, he saw the reflexive way she held the chair, felt her presence rich in the room, breathed her linseed oil scent. This was her room. "You are Piero Lombardo."

She raised her chin a little more, but did not admit it.

Suddenly he remembered what brought him to this room in the first place. "You are quite the mistress of disguise, aren't you?"

Serena leaned on the chair just to remain standing. She did not know how he had managed to become so disheveled on his way over, but she felt the full force of his transformation. Once more, he was a pirate with loose hair and a tattered shirt, and he had drawn his sword to prove it. She recognized that pirate and that recognition spawned desire, an unwelcome, dangerous attraction which she fought to suppress. Now he was stalking toward her, his eyes black with anger.

"What are you?" he said, revulsion in his voice, his face. "You're no pious widow, that is certain."

She backed up, but he kept up his menacing advance. "Widowhood is a mask you use to hide your vices. Of course you want to live alone. By day you practice a man's profession, and by night you play the—"

She slapped him as hard as she could. The cracking noise snapped back at her off the windows, then the room fell deadly silent. She heard her own breath in her ears. Her palm was numb. And he still glowered down on her, a livid handprint on his cheek.

"Forgive me my directness, but what would you call a lady who walks the streets giving herself to strangers?"

She slapped him again, bruising the bones in her hand. "You hypocrite."

The second blow did not faze him any more than the first. She wished she were a man, a big man, so that she could lay him out with a punch. Beat his face in.

"There never was another man!" he shouted. "You were free all along. You were playing me. I thought you needed my protection. All along I needed protection from you."

"Oh, yes, tell me all about your suffering!" Pure indignation gave her courage against this raging mountain of a man. Cursing her enormous skirts, she squeezed past him and moved to the open center of the room. "You play injured when you are the one who has broken into my home and forced this interview on me? You accuse me of vice? You? A practiced whoremonger! A man who would throw a widow on the streets to appease his own vanity!"

His lip curled. "Sending a brat back to her papa in Lombardy is hardly the same as tossing a widow on the streets."

"You know nothing. You disgust me. You arrogant, blind, selfish—"

He interrupted her with a laugh, a humorless bark, and shook his head with a rueful smile. "It's going to be a beautiful marriage, Bella."

"What are you talking about?"

"We are the talk of Marissa's dinner party. They know we are lovers. They know we share a house. And you—you are not even out of mourning!" His look, his gesture, was pure accusation. "That is such a nice touch, Bella. The scandal will be huge. We have no choice now but to marry."

"Marry you?" she choked. "I would never marry you!" The thought made her physically ill. She prayed this was a nightmare that she could wake up from.

"You should have thought about that before you slapped your tits in a crowded drawing room and shouted, 'Recognize these?'"

"I did not say that! And don't blame this on me!"

He pointed an accusing finger directly at her nose. She turned her face away and backed up, trying to evade his steady advance, his blistering accusations.

"It is entirely your fault, Signora Alberenghi. First of all, you should never have been living here alone in the first place. I told you it would mean trouble for us. I never suspected just how much. As a gentlewoman—or rather as a supposed gentlewoman—you know the thin line you walk when you take a lover. You put both of us at risk by hiding your identity from me."

"I had to." Serena managed to put her easel between them and found she could breathe again. "I did not know who you were or if I could trust you."

"That is another lie, and you know it." He swung around the easel to continue his inexorable advance, his features set in a snarl. "But I do not speak of our affair. I speak of a week ago, when you recognized me, but chose to keep it to yourself."

Serena found herself pressed up against the window; her fingers splayed against the cool glass. She had to crane her neck up to look him the eye. If he were any sort of gentleman, her next words would devastate him. For the first time, she hoped he was a gentleman. "I said nothing because I was ashamed. Ashamed to ever have been intimate with a man like you."

With grim satisfaction, she watched him stagger backward, then she drove the point home. "Name one reason why I owe you my honesty or anything else, Signore Valaresso."

His face lost all of its color and his hand went to the hilt of his sword.

"What, are you going to run me through?"

With one quick step, he closed the distance between them. He grabbed the back of her head with hard fingers and pulled her close. Showing her all his wolf's teeth, he said softly, "You cannot imagine how badly I would like to, Signora Alberenghi."

Their faces were only inches apart. His heart pounded against hers. His fingers hurt her head. Without a mask, Serena felt exposed, ripped open by the blazing inspection of his eyes. She could not afford to show him even a hint of weakness. "Leave. Now. You cannot insult me more than you already have."

His face went blank, shifting from anger to eerie control, and his question was a whisper. "Tell me first, how many others have you played this game with?"

She was wrong. He had found a way to insult her more. "I said leave."

Without further argument, he stepped back, bowed, and stalked out of the room. In a few seconds, she heard the front door slam, and after that, his door below. Then she knew she was safe. Prizzi ran in and gathered her in her arms.

* * * *

Dante yanked on a fresh suit and ran into the cold, misty streets, gasping with rage barely contained. Never had he teetered so near the edge of bloody madness. He was stiff as a pike and capable of murder. If he did not let blood, his own or someone else's, he would explode. They would sweep pieces of him off the street the next morning.

He formed a plan of simple genius. First, he would get blind drunk, then he would find himself a woman, maybe two, and fuck his way into forgetfulness. If he could start a brawl before the sun came up, so much the better. Tomorrow would be soon enough for thinking about the prospect of being shackled to a lying, viper-tongued witch.

It was time for him to take advantage of his celebrity. He headed to the Ridotto.

Everyone went to that venerable, slightly shabby gaming house, if not to gamble, then to gossip or conduct intrigues. Its long halls were packed that night. Nonetheless, he was soon recognized, and became the center of attention.

"Valaresso is here! Look! Valaresso!" He swallowed that attention like a bitter tonic. It carried him forward.

He shook hands, slapped backs, drank whatever was handed to him. Glass after glass. The alcohol dulled some of his rage, but he still felt sharp edges jabbing through his smooth exterior. Hiding his fangs as best he could, he charmed the mamas and bowed low to their blushing daughters. All the while, he kept his eyes on the more experienced women. They did not disappoint him.

Perfumed and bejeweled, powdered and coiffed, they surrounded him wherever he went, flirting with their huge,

embroidered fans. Venetian women were without doubt the most beautiful in the world, he decided, and very clever with their fans. Dante enjoyed their games and flirted with them outrageously, indiscriminately.

He captured the fan of one bold lady and snapped it shut.

"You beast!" She circled him, trying to snatch her fan back as he passed it from one hand to the other, keeping it just out of her reach. Despite the fact that she had been walking with another man, or rather, because of it, he brought the closed fan under her chin and held it there. Her eyes went wide, then hooded expectantly. Very slowly, he drew the closed fan down the centerline of her throat, down, down into the depths of her cleavage. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear and felt a heavy, restraining hand on his shoulder. Smiling with cold anticipation, he straightened and turned to face her companion. The man met his eyes, mumbled an apology, spun on his heel and walked away. Dante cursed beneath his breath and pressed the fan back into the shocked woman's hand. He did not want her. He kept moving, searching.

Someone offered him their place at a card table. After he sat down, he recognized the woman to his left. Long ago, before he went off to sea for the first time, they had engaged in an innocent romance. Mostly they had mooned at each other from a distance and exchanged letters via friends. Now she was married with children, but the years had not hurt her at all. She had always been a dark beauty.

"I remember the time we kissed." Her dark eyebrows lifted as she peeked at him over her cards. "But surely you do not."

"You underestimate your charms, Signora. I would never forget your kiss." He laughed. "I also will never forget my absolute terror that your mother would catch us."

"Ah, Mama. She is still a dragon. Let me test your memory. Where did we kiss?"

"Wasn't it an alcove, after Mass?"

"You do remember!" His voice dropped so that only he could hear her next words. "I've often regretted we had only the one kiss."

Dante glanced up at her through his lashes. "I've thought the same thing myself." Beneath the table, her hand found his knee and ran up his thigh.

By signals and glances, they contrived to meet in a darkened side room. Her tall, lush body filled his arms very nicely. They whispered and laughed and exchanged playful kisses—and that was as all they did. Once he was alone with her, he knew he did not have it in him to do anything more. Somehow she did not please him after all. She was too tall, her breasts too ample, her manners too sophisticated. With no small effort, and a great deal of awkwardness, he managed to extract himself from the situation and escaped into the streets, more frustrated than ever.

Since Bella had quite literally left him hanging at Luigi's, he had burned. Now he knew he burned for her alone. The only thing wrong with the lady at the Ridotto was that she was not Bella and his cock wanted Bella. It did not understand that she had died the day he met Signora Alberenghi.

He let the crowds carry him through celebrating city, from spectacle to spectacle, until he ended in a brothel in the small

hours of the morning. In an attempt to fool his cock, he chose a slight, blonde woman to take upstairs. It was a sad act of desperation, but he was beyond caring.

If he closed his eyes, he could pretend that she was Bella and that they were above Luigi's. For a few minutes this worked quite well, but he could not sustain the fantasy. The woman under him did not tremble with raw need. She did not confess her fantasies to him in husky whispers. Instead, she moaned diligently and told him how good he was, how big he was, until he had to ask her to not speak. But by then it was too late.

"It happens," she shrugged.

It had never happened to him before. She offered to take him in her mouth. He waved her away. "By hand?" she offered.

"No, but would you masturbate for me?"

Though she tried not to show it, he could tell the idea repulsed her. "Why don't I call in one of the other girls and we'll play together for you. Don't you think that would be more fun?"

Dante did not take her up on her offer. Instead, he left soon after with a bottle of the brothel's best in his hand. From there, he staggered to a popular seaman's tavern where he met a fellow who had once been a shipmate. That man was crying into his mug, nursing a broken heart.

Together they sang one sea shanty after another, but only the morbid and depressing ones, until the rest of the patrons shouted them down and pelted them with nuts. He would not have come home at all had his gondolier not found him there

at dawn and convinced him to return home for a bath and breakfast.

* * * *

After Valaresso left, Serena did not cry or rage. She stood rooted where he had left her, until Prizzi came and folded Serena's fingers around a glass of brandy.

"Your hands are like ice, love," she said. "Come to your room. Let's take off your stays."

Serena let her lead her away. "We must leave for Lombardy, Prizzi, as quickly as we can."

"Of course. We cannot go on living above that horrible man."

"He says we should marry. I won't do it." Her voice was as flat as if she were discussing the laundry bill.

Prizzi closed the doors to her room. "No, you should not."

"He knows all my secrets. A word from him could destroy me. He could kill Piero Lombardo too. If anybody finds out Lombardo is a female, no one will buy his work."

"Do you really think he would ruin you?"

Serena shrugged and stared down into her glass. "He is very angry. He could do anything. I will give him his palazzo. I'll remove myself from his sight as quickly as I can. It's my best chance."

Prizzi frowned. "Drink your brandy, love."

"I think we should start packing now."

"Rena, it is near midnight."

"I am not sleeping tonight, that I know. Give me some paper and I'll start making lists."

* * * *

The sun was rising when Dante returned home. He stood in his gondola, just barely stood, and squinted against the merciless light. In a season of fogs, a bright morning was nothing but a cruelty. Despite heroic efforts to drink himself to death, he was still conscious and more miserable than ever. Only the thought of food, eggs preferably, and the promise of a dark, comfortable bed kept him from pitching himself overboard on the way home. All around him, Venice was stirring with the new day. The canal was already busy with boats.

They rounded a bend, and the peaceful white marble face of the Ca' Valaresso rose before him like a vision of heaven. A flash of green caught his eye on the upstairs balcony. It was Bella, or the widow, or maybe even that painter fellow, Lambrini, or whatever his name was, watching the dawn. She wore nothing but a wrap that blew open around her legs. Her head was bare, her hair loose. Ah, his wife-to-be, displaying her goods to all of Venice like the whore she was.

As he was only one gondola among many, she did not notice him on the water. Bracing her palms on the balcony railing, she leaned forward so that the wind caught her red-gold hair and whipped it off her face. His breath caught in his throat. In that pose, she reminded him of the figurehead of one of his favorite ships, the *Titania*, named after Shakespeare's fairy queen. That figurehead was so beautiful, so beloved by all the ship's crew, that they drew lots to determine who had the privilege of polishing her.

"Well, no one is going to polish her but me from now on."

"Did you say something, Signore?"

His gondolier began to bring the boat around slowly, pushing it into position to slide into the dock beneath the palazzo. That finally caught her attention and she looked down from the balcony. Their eyes met and she raised her lip at him as if he were the lowest species of reptile she had ever encountered.

He saluted her. "Hail, fairy witch!"

She turned to leave and that would not do at all. So he shouted, "Citizens of Venice, wish me joy! I am betrothed to this beauty!" He gestured up at her for the benefit of the people on the water. She pulled her wrap tight and retreated into the shadows. Applause and congratulations broke out from the boats nearest him. He acknowledged their good wishes with an unsteady bow. "And I promise, the first thing I will do when I am her husband is buy her something to wear!"

"Can't you get him inside any faster?"

That was his wife-to-be, talking to his gondolier.

"As fast as I can, Signora."

"Don't worry, Bella, I will be with you soon enough."

She leaned over the balcony all in a fury, but very lovely—what with her breasts hanging out for him, his gondolier and every fishmonger and fruit seller to admire. "Listen to me, Valaresso. If you so much as come near my door, I will have my footman beat your skull into pulp. Do you understand?"

Scattered laughs crisscrossed the canal. They did not understand. She did not understand.

"Bella, if you do that, who is going to polish you? No one else can do it right. Stop, Marco. Hold the boat steady."

"Marco, ignore him. Take the gondola in or I'll send my man down to do it for you."

"Marco, do not listen to the missus. I have business I have to discuss with her. Right now."

Bella vanished from his view, but he suspected she was within earshot.

"Bella, Bella, *bellissima*! I love you!" he bellowed. "I learned that tonight! You want to know how?"

Like magic, she appeared at the railing again, but she did not appear particularly moved by his declaration. In fact, her resemblance to the sour widow was uncanny. "My name is not Bella, you fool! Marco, do your job!"

"Hold steady, Marco." The gondola rocked inordinately beneath his feet and it was very hard to keep his balance. Yet he did, for he had something important to say. "Bella, I know I love you because my cock tells me so."

Marco cleared his throat and began to slide the gondola into the docking bay. Dante had to rush to finish while he could still see her above. "It will not have any other woman in Venice, and Lord knows I have tried my best! Ladies and whores both, just to be sure." He lost his balance, spread his arms wide and recovered himself. "Why don't you consult your sweet kitty, Bella? I wager it will tell you the same."

Bella disappeared, then reappeared with a pot of geraniums which she dropped over the side of the balcony. Dante considered his options as the pot plummeted toward his head. There seemed to be plenty of time for

consideration. The boat was drifting forward at a certain rate of speed, and the pot was falling at a certain rate of speed, and if he knew those speeds and the distance from the balcony to the water, perhaps he could decide to lean backward or forward to avoid it. But he knew none of these things and so he came to the conclusion that he might die in a moment. Instead, the pot smashed at his feet, a terra cotta bomb. Pottery shards, red petals and black soil flew in his face. The gondola lurched, and in what he imagined was a very dignified manner, he fell overboard.

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Chapter Nine

As much as Serena wanted to, she could not just pick up and leave. There were accounts to be settled, farewell calls to be made, commissioned paintings to be completed and delivered to her dealer. All of her servants needed letters of recommendation and help finding new positions.

Since Alberenghi's death, everyone had expected this day would come, but never so suddenly. The entire house labored under a funereal air.

Serena, Prizzi and the housekeeper began a painstaking room to room inventory, deciding which pieces of art and furniture she would keep, which she would sell and which she would give away. Whichever way she decided, it all had to be packed up and labeled. She stumbled through the process as if she were making her own final arrangements. Valaresso's accusations were like slow poison in her heart. Had she behaved like a whore?

"Let us rest," Prizzi suggested, guiding her to a seat. "Would you like some wine? Maybe something to eat?"

"No, we must keep working."

Prizzi pressed her down into the seat. "It cannot be done in a day, love, not even in a week. There's no use in wearing yourself out."

Serena slumped. Nothing really mattered, after all. She caught Prizzi's hand, encouraging her to sit next to her. "Do you remember how content we were just a week ago? We had Venice. We had our freedom. Piero Lombardo was doing

well. No one bothered us. It was a good life. Then Valaresso came along."

Prizzi agreed. "It is a shame they fished him out of the canal so quickly this morning."

Serena laughed. Otherwise she would cry. When he tumbled overboard, she thought he might actually drown, dragged down by his heavy cloak and the weight of his own arrogance. But a fishmonger came to his gondolier's aid, and together they managed to haul his carcass out of the water. Much to her satisfaction, he did not end up back in his own sumptuous gondola, but instead wedged ignobly between a basket of sardines and a crate of live crabs. That sight nearly made up for his vulgar insults.

"But you know, I do not blame him for being what he is. I blame myself for wanting too much. I should have been content with what I had. It all fell apart when I asked for more." She gestured at her house in turmoil. "This is my punishment."

"What do you say? That God sent Valaresso to punish you for wanting Valaresso?"

"All I know is that everyone is granted a few gifts in this life and they should be content with whatever they get. I had money and some talent and a good friend." She squeezed Prizzi's hand. "That is more than most. But I was not happy with my blessings. I wanted more—adventure, passion, I don't know what."

"Love."

"Love ... yes. I should have known better."

Prizzi touched her cheek. "Rena, we all deserve love. It is not a sin to ask for it."

* * * *

It fell to Serena alone to sort through her husband's study. She'd been avoiding the task since his death. The room was musty after being shut up for so long. Throwing open the windows, she surveyed the room in despair. There were so many books, so many papers, and worst of all, his huge collection of tiny votive offerings dug out of old wells. These were the coins, jewelry and little figurines that ancient Romans had tossed into the water for luck. Each piece represented the forgotten wish of someone long dead. She did not even know how to begin sorting them, who would want them, or what they were worth. While he was sick, Alberenghi had given her a few instructions, but not enough. He never had really believed he was dying.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped behind his desk and sat down in his chair. She had never sat there before, but she had often stood in front of the desk. She ran her hands over the well-worn chair arms. The conversations they had shared there came back to her. She pushed them aside.

Taking another breath, she pulled open the central drawer. His spectacles lay there, patiently waiting to be used again. As carefully as if they were a frail, living thing, she placed them on the desk and remembered how they once sat on his face.

The scandal she had created would hurt her, her family and her servants. But the thought of shaming his name was

what finally made the tears come. Very quietly, as she knew he would have preferred, she cried bitter, regretful tears. "I am so sorry, Alberenghi," she sobbed aloud. "I never meant to disgrace you."

* * * *

Late that night, Serena crept down the stairs outside her apartment with a basket in her arms. Over the course of the day, she had found many small things belonging to Arturo Valaresso and planned to leave them by his son's front door. Just as she bent down with the basket, the door swung open.

"Jesus!" Valaresso exclaimed. Both of them leaped backward.

Serena recovered herself first. "These things belonged to your father," she said and shoved the basket toward him.

At first, he just blinked at her as if he did not understand a word she said. She wondered if he was still drunk. He looked haggard, as bad as she felt. "My father?" he repeated.

She pushed the basket at him again, hitting him in the chest with it. Startled, he took it from her and shifted it about in his arms.

"I was just coming upstairs, to apologize," he blurted.

She stared at him stonily. It was rather late at night to begin an apology which should take several hours, at least.

"I sincerely regret my behavior this morning. I am told I put on quite a show. What I do remember appalls me. I ... I found a sardine in my pocket. Please understand that it was the wine that was talking."

He only regretted the public scene. Not the private insults the night before. Serena raised a cynical brow at him. "*In vino veritas.*"

"There was no truth in anything I said this morning." He darted his eyes away from hers. The basket became suddenly interesting to him. With an expression of disbelief, he pulled out a pair of curly-toed Turkish slippers embroidered in gold and purple. "These were my father's?"

Apparently the apology was over. "He kept them in our house."

His gaze lingered on her face longer than was appropriate and his brow creased. After a half a day crying amongst dusty papers, she knew she looked a fright and she did not want him to think she had been crying over him. Ducking her head, she turned away.

His voice held her back. "You knew my father well, then?"

"Of course I did. He was in our house, at our table, nearly every day." Her tone was sharp, but the memory of Arturo and his hearty laugh softened her, and out of respect she added, "He was a good man and I miss him."

"What do you miss about him?"

It was a sincere question, so she answered it. "His stories, without a doubt." All day, she had lived in memories of her husband, his friend and their life in Ca' Valaresso. Telling him this was like continuing a conversation she had been having with herself. "He always had the right story for any occasion and he knew so many, he never repeated them."

Valaresso lifted a chess piece out of the basket and let it fall again. "He did tell a good tale." As if to himself, he added, "I miss him too. It is not really home here without him."

"When did you last see him?" She did not care particularly if the question hurt.

"Three years ago, just briefly. I was very busy and slept on my ship instead of here, else, I suppose, I would have met you." Awkwardly, he paused, and they both stared fixedly in different directions. He cleared his throat. "I had a plan, you see, to make my fortune and return home. Then I would spend time with my father and give him grandchildren. It just took a little longer than I expected and he did not have that time."

"I was with him at the end." This was something she would have shared with him earlier if things were different between them. Tonight she wanted to tell him because she could see that he, too, had been stewing in memories all day, and she knew how hard that was on a heart. Valaresso fixed his gaze on her. She could not hold it, so dropped her eyes to continue.

"We—we had dinner together at his place—at your place. After my husband died, we often spent evenings together, you see. He was in good spirits that night but had been complaining of weakness over the past two days. After dinner, I read aloud to him. As I did, he fell asleep in his chair and did not wake up. It was very peaceful. I thought you should know."

The expression in his large, dark eyes was unreadable. She thought it might be horror. Or maybe shock. No doubt the

man would now suspect her of contributing to his father's death. She should not have said anything at all.

At last he spoke. "What did you read?"

"Read?"

"To him. What were the last words he heard?"

Serena cringed. If only it were the Bible. But she could not lie about a man's last moments. "I read *The Decameron*. By his request."

"Which tale?"

A blush heated her cheeks. "It was the one about the man who tricks the girl into laying with him by telling her his, um ... that the devil was between his legs, and..."

Valaresso waved his hand. "I know that one."

"Your father was smiling when he fell asleep."

"Good."

Still his expression was mysterious. Flat. Another long silence fell. He searched her face intently. "Did you love your husband?"

"Yes." Her answer came before she realized how leading, how judgmental that question was coming from him. Unable to spend another moment in his company, Serena turned and mounted the stairs. "I hope to move out in a week, but it may be as long as two before I can settle my servants."

"No."

She stopped climbing. "Pardon me?"

"You do not have to go."

"Yes, I do." She began to climb again.

"Please, hear me out."

Serena turned on the stair and nodded for him to continue.

"I am going to return to the sea." He did not look at her, but at some distant point over her shoulder. His mouth twisted. "It is obvious that I am not meant for a civilized life on land. It was a mistake for me to think it. I will set sail as soon as possible. You may remain here as long as you like. Before I go, though, I recommend you accept my offer of marriage."

He held up his hand to prevent her protest. "Please let me explain. If you wish to battle society on your own, you certainly may. But I stand by my offer. We can announce our engagement before I leave. I will return after you are out of mourning to formalize the arrangement. Then I will leave again. It would be, of course, a marriage in name only. One of the chief advantages of this arrangement is that if I should die at sea, the palazzo would fall to you."

Serena clutched the banister. He could not have said anything which would have surprised her more. "But what of your plans?"

"I no longer have plans." He shoved his hands in his pockets like a boy.

He was not himself. Drunk still, most likely. "Signore, I beg you to withdraw this proposal for another day or two. I think you are not quite well this evening."

"My part of the decision is already made. The ship is being provisioned. I will leave Venice. The rest of the decision is yours alone."

"Coward." The word leaped from her lips without conscious thought. She put her hand to her mouth in dismay.

He took a step toward her. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I will consider your offer tonight."

Before she could get far, he blocked her way and forced her back down the stairs. "Am I the coward? Am I the one who hides from his own lover? Tell me, if we had not had this unfortunate encounter with the truth, how much longer would you have toyed with me?"

She tried to dodge around him, but he caught her by the shoulders, his hands burning through her sleeves. It was hateful to be so close to him again, close enough to kiss. Her footman was within earshot, but she did not have enough air in her lungs to call for him. Hating her own weakness, she hung her head and whispered, "Please, let me go."

Instead, he brushed his mouth against her brow. "How many others have you played whore for? Just tell me that."

Serena could have sworn that every tear in her had already spilled that day, but it seemed there were plenty more. She tried to push him away, but her arms lost all their strength. "Have we not shamed ourselves enough already?"

Instead of letting her go, he shifted his hands to her face and wiped away her tears with his thumbs. She grimaced and squirmed, but he held her fast. Opening her eyes, she saw changing emotions flickering fast across his features, anger, confusion, pain. They settled into something resembling curiosity and his eyelids lowered. She feared he might kiss her.

"Don't touch me!" she cried. With that cry, her strength returned. Wrenching free of his hands with a violent twist, she fled up the stairs.

Dante returned to his own apartment, set the basket down and swiped his hand over his face. In the greatest consternation, he put his hands on his hips, turned around in a circle, shook his head, then rubbed his face again. "Damn it!" The woman had such a hold on him it was frightening. He did not want to be in her grip. He did not want to be tied to a woman so debauched that she would run the street, catting with strangers while still wearing mourning. "Signore?" His housekeeper appeared in the darkened hall. He had told his servants he would be out all night.

"I have decided to stay here after all. I will want a late supper."

Now that everyone knew them to be lovers, it hardly mattered whether he slept in the apartment or on his ship. Steeling himself, he picked up the basket of his father's things and walked to his study to look through it. Of course he was already surrounded by all of his father's possessions. He could not turn left or right in his house without remembering something of his father, but this basket intrigued him because it was proof of his intimacy with the Alberenghis. The homey things it contained told him that they must have been like family to his father. Family he otherwise lacked, because his only surviving son spent all his time at sea, trying to make him proud. How much happier would his father have been to have his son at his side? And just what did his success mean now that he had no one to share it with?

The basket sat on the desk like an accusation. He tried to push away useless regrets. To distract himself, Dante wondered what his father had thought of his friend's little

wife. He had never said anything specific about her in his letters, but it seemed they were close. Close enough that he would shuffle around her house in garish Turkish slippers. Close enough to entertain her with his stories. Close enough to die in front of her. Was it possible that he..?

Stop it. You are insane. Out of control.

Dante buried his face in his hands. He was grateful that his father did not die alone. He believed he had done just that all this time. Instead he died with a pretty girl reading him his favorite book. That was a good death.

His father was a man of high standards and he regarded Serena Alberenghi a friend. Marissa called her a "sweet girl" and "an angel." How was it possible for a woman to be an angel and a trollop at the same time? It was not possible. A lady was a lady. One did not have to weigh conflicting evidence about a lady's virtue. This woman was no lady. He knew that better than anyone.

A floorboard creaked overhead. He pricked up his ears and listened for footsteps. He was certain he knew her step by now and recognized it above him. She was moving around her studio.

He put his feet up on his desk and leaned back in his chair, staring at that spot on ceiling, trying to imagine her creating those beautiful paintings. Again his mind twisted in knots. His mistress painted like a master. The woman confounded him at every turn. He could not think straight when he was in front of her, and when he was away from her, he could not understand her at all.

That night, she had appeared more fragile than he had ever seen her, a far different sort of creature than his masked lover or the predatory woman who had deceived him so boldly. Her tears nearly moved him to kiss her. Could he have stopped if he kissed her once? It was his good fortune that she no longer wanted him. Even so, he could not stop pictures from forming in his mind. It was too tempting to imagine the kiss that might have been. He would have cupped her face as he lowered his lips to hers. His eyes closed, and the fantasy came to life.

She did not respond, but she did not resist. He kissed each trembling eyelid, tasted her wet tears, and returned to her mouth. By then her lips had softened and moved under his. Moaning sweetly, she twined her arms around his neck and leaned into him, kissing him honestly, directly, as she always did.

Starved after so long apart, their passion flared and they began to tear at each other's clothes. Because it was his fantasy, she wore no stays, or much of anything, really. He tore open her shift and laid his hands on her small, high breasts.

Abruptly, Dante dropped his feet to the floor. He went to the door, locked it and leaned his back against it. Keeping his eyes on the ceiling, on the spot where he imagined her to be, he opened his breeches. Roughly, he took himself in hand. He was hard. He had been hard ever since he had held her in the hall. *In his mind, they were now tangled on the staircase between the apartments. She was kneeling beneath him and she was entirely naked, soft, yielding. In time with the motion*

*of his own hand, he thrust into her again and again.
Powerfully. Angrily.*

"Who else?" he demanded with each thrust. "How many?"

"You!" she cried, gripping the stair. "Only you!"

He dropped to his knees in front of the door, gasping, his hand jerking relentlessly. Suddenly, he no longer imagined the staircase. Instead, he was at Luigi's, and he was tied down, his arms spread wide, and she was riding him like a demon. Riding him past endurance. Every part of him was straining. He lifted his hips to meet her, she came down on him hard, and he let go, spurting into her over and over, crying her name.

"Witch." Dante slumped forward, his spent cock in his hand, lonelier than he had ever been in his life.

A sharp explosion of breaking glass brought him up with a start. It sounded as if a bottle had been thrown to the floor above his head. In short succession he heard another crash, and another, upstairs. One or two people ran into the room by the sound of the footsteps. He heard a muffled cry, and then all was quiet above.

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Chapter Ten

Near dawn, Dante thought he heard some disturbance coming from the servant's quarters. Just as he was about to investigate, Marco came tearing into his room. Dante was not asleep. He'd not even undressed. Instead, he had been pacing. The bedroom floor was covered with crumpled letters to her, to his father, to himself.

"Andrea has set his room on fire!"

Almost happy for such a distraction, Dante ran toward the fire. Marco ran alongside, explaining.

"He came in drunk as a sow. Left his candle by the curtain, I think. Too stupid to put it out fast enough."

Dante swore. Andrea was his page and only thirteen years old. He should have not been allowed out on the final, most convulsive night of Carnival.

Working together, Dante and his servants beat the blaze down and soaked the room with buckets of water while the housekeeper held the distraught boy in a corner to keep him out of the way. Just as they agreed their work was done, they heard a shriek. Flames had broken out in next room over. And then someone spotted more two doors down. The fire was spreading inside the walls.

Dante ordered an evacuation and ran upstairs to wake the Alberenghi household. Needless to say, they were wary of answering his knock, but the word "fire" did much to remove their hesitance. He stayed only long enough to see that household erupt into chaos before running back down to his

own people. By the time he returned, he found the fire had spread faster than he had expected.

Dante fought down a surge of rising panic. There was nothing he dreaded more than fire. It was a seaman's worst enemy, far more dangerous than wind, water or lightning. All of his sailor's superstitions took hold of him and he began to fear the worst. Like a worried sheep dog, he ran from room to room, checking for stragglers. His own people were making their way out with armloads of possessions, but no one was coming down from upstairs.

Once more he ran upstairs, shouting, "Flee! Flee now! Leave your possessions!"

With a voice meant to rouse sailors in storms, and a face blackened with smoke, he succeeded in frightening half of her staff down the stairs at once. Further into the apartment, he found Serena and the rest of her servants standing around in their nightclothes, arms loaded, discussing whether they had everything important as if they were about to take a country outing. Smoke swirled around their heads.

"Out! Now!" he roared, and to his great relief they began to file out of the apartment. He ran ahead of them down the stairs, now full of smoke, to see his own people accounted for. When the last of the Alberenghi household came down they could account for everyone—except their mistress.

"Where is she?" He grabbed her maid by the shoulders.

"She was right behind me!" the woman cried, staring in horror at the smoke billowing out the door.

"Damn her!" He strode back toward the door, bracing himself to go back inside.

The maid caught up with him, touched his arm. "Her paintings!" was all she said, and he understood. Taking a deep breath of fresh air into his lungs, he plunged into thick smoke and ran up the stairs blind. In the apartment, the smoke was almost as thick. A few candles, left here and there, flickered in the gloom like ships' lights far out at sea. His lungs burned for air.

And there she was, a white heap on the studio floor. He ran right past her, threw the balcony doors open and sucked in a breath of clean air before returning to her side. The floor beneath them was hot. She was unconscious. Overcome by smoke, she had collapsed holding an armload of paintings. Shaking his head at his own foolishness as well as hers, he decided to take a risk for her sake. He picked up her precious paintings and tossed them over the balcony.

Just as he returned to her, a patch of floor near her head burst into flames. The acrid smell of burning hair filled his nose. Tiny embers flew upward as he beat out the flame, leaving the ends of her hair blackened and curled. The fire licked up his calves as he bent down to lift her into his arms. It was impossible to go back down the front stairs. He could not even trust his weight on the floor. Instead he went out onto the balcony. Balancing her weight, he kicked off his shoes and climbed over the balustrade. The flames burning on the lower level lit up the dark waters far below. Above, the sky turned purple with the new dawn.

Bella dangled in his arms, pale and limp, but he did not think she was dead. He brushed his lips over her brow and offered up a prayer to Saint Nicholas for safe passage. Then

he shifted her body so that he held her upright against his chest, locked his wrists at her back, and jumped feet first into the canal.

All his life, he'd managed to avoid falling into those murky, stinking waters, and now he was doing it for the second time in two days. The canal was not very deep. He hit bottom instantly, jarring his bones, but the deep layer of soft silt and slime cushioned the impact. Kicking free of the muck, he brought Serena to the top and began to tow her to the nearest quay. The plunge did not revive her. Now he did not even know if she still breathed.

A crowd of onlookers attracted by the splashing stood along the canal walls watching him swim in, among them the little urchins called canal rats. He shouted, "There are paintings in the water! I will pay for each of them!" The canal filled with boys swimming like tadpoles.

Hands reached out and pulled Serena out of the water. He climbed out after her, shaking hard no matter how much he tried not to. To his relief, she stirred and coughed. Not liking the wet sound of it, he turned her on the side and struck her hard on the back. Water gushed from her mouth, she choked and sputtered and then lay still once more. Her skin was not just pale, it was green. He covered her with his own body, protecting her from the cold and from the crowd. Cradling her head in his arms, he tried to call her back to life. "Bella?"

Her eyes opened a little. She focused on him and the faintest smile appeared on her colorless lips. "Please, grant me your forgiveness," she croaked. "I never meant to hurt you."

"You are not going to die," he said, taking one her hands and chafing it between his own.

"I think I may," she murmured, and slipped away from him.

* * * *

Serena woke in a strange bedroom. For a while, she studied the embroidered poppies on the bed curtains, her mind a perfect blank. Then she remembered. Turning her head, she found Prizzi dozing in a chair beside the bed. A single candle burned between them.

At her stirring, Prizzi's head snapped up and she smiled with relief. "I am so glad you are awake. You have slept like the dead, all through the day and half the night."

"Are we all safe? Was anyone hurt?" Her throat felt rough, and parched.

Prizzi's lips pressed into a tight line. "Other than yourself, no."

Serena considered whether or not she was hurt, wiggled her fingers and toes to be sure. Her head hurt some. One arm was a little stiff. She lifted it up and saw the cuts inside her elbow. A doctor had bled her. "I am not hurt. I'm tired, but well enough."

Prizzi gave her a withering look. "Well enough for so nearly being dead."

Letting that pass, Serena changed the subject. "Where are we?"

"Marissa Da Ponte took us in. It was Valaresso's idea to drag us all here at dawn. A sorry lot we were, holding our

odds and ends—and you!" Prizzi shook her head at the memory, but did not elaborate. "But the Signora did not even blink. I like her very much." She stood and rang the pull bell. "There is soup waiting for you in the kitchen, if anyone is awake to hear my call." Then she handed her a glass of water.

Serena drank it down thirstily and asked for another. "Is Valaresso staying here too?"

"No, he and his people are somewhere else." Prizzi grinned. "Are you happy or sad to hear that?"

"That depends." Serena blushed, remembering his face, dripping wet and full of concern, hanging over her. Nothing after that and no memory of how they came to be that way. She lifted a piece of her hair and frowned at its blackened tips.

So Prizzi told her everything she knew about the fire, from beginning to end, how it started and spread and how Valaresso had gone back into the burning house for her. At this point Prizzi paused in her narrative to finally deliver the scolding that Serena deserved for going back into the fire for her paintings, finishing with, "How could you be so stupid?"

"I was thinking of the money they meant for us, Prizzi! Money enough for a little freedom here before exile to Lombardy."

"Shrouds have no pockets," Prizzi sniffed, and continued with her story, explaining how Valaresso had jumped three stories into the canal with her in his arms, swam her ashore and restored her life in some miraculous fashion. Prizzi did not see the resurrection herself, as she was fighting through

the crowd at the time, but witnesses assured her it was amazing.

"Well," Serena muttered, "that was kind of him."

"He carried you here himself. No one was good enough to touch you."

After being assured that she would live, he returned to the fire. The entire neighborhood fought the blaze through the morning to keep it from spreading. The building still stood, but the inside was gutted. Prizzi had heard through one of Valaresso's servants that he had already declared his intention to rebuild.

"Everything inside was lost," she concluded. "We carried out the silver and the strong boxes and important papers, the painting of Our Lady, your jewelry, the Cook's parrot and not much else."

"All of it gone." Serena marveled. "Our whole life. All of Alberenghi's papers and antiques. Gone. All the beautiful things. Mama's portrait. Oh, and all the books!"

"All gone." Prizzi confirmed, looking tired. "And your paintings and drawings, too, 'Rena. I am so sorry for it."

Serena suspected she had yet to feel the loss of that night, but she tried to be brave and say the right things. "All that matters is that we have ourselves. We have money in the bank, and a roof over our heads. As for the paintings, well, I will make more"

But never again will I paint that view, never again will I paint Venice so well.

Prizzi fussed over her like a hen. After feeding her soup, she sponged all traces of canal scent off her and then combed

out her hair and trimmed off the burnt ends. By that time, Serena was more than ready to sleep again, and convinced Prizzi that she was well enough to sleep without being watched. Hiding a huge yawn, Prizzi relented and went to her own room.

When Serena woke next, the moon shone in the room, turning everything blue. Again she felt a presence in the chair next to her bed, but this time it was large and brooding. Turning toward the shadow she said, "Dante?"

It responded, "Serena?"

Hearing her name out of his lips for the first time had the most peculiar effect on her heart. She reached out her hand to him and he kissed it and clasped it between his hands.

"How are you?"

"Come here," she whispered.

The bed sagged under his weight as he slipped under the blankets with her and folded her to him, bringing with him great warmth and all the reassurance she longed for. In a cracked whisper, he said, "I am so sorry." With great care he laid slow kisses across her brow, on her eyelids, on the tip of her nose. "So very sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

Forgiveness, her own and his, flowed through her like the purest water. "Say it again," she breathed in his ear.

"Forgive me, a thousand times over."

"I forgive you." She touched the parts of his face she had never touched before, sweeping her thumbs up the sides of his nose and over his brows. In the quiet darkness, they met each other as if for the first time and shared a kiss so brief it echoed on and on, so gentle, it shook them both to their

bones. They held each other, hardly daring to breathe, until at last Serena said, "Lent has begun."

"No more masks," he agreed and kissed her again.

Together they wove a cocoon of tenderness around themselves to keep all the world out. They kissed and comforted one another until Serena fell asleep on his shoulder. When Dante tried to slip away at dawn, she woke and begged him to stay. As he had not rested for two days, he relented, and fell into such a profound sleep that even the bright morning sun falling on his face did not disturb him.

* * * *

"The maid told me something odd was going on in here, but I would not have believed it if I did not see it with my own eyes." Marissa Da Ponte strode toward the bed, still in her lace dressing gown and bonnet, hands on her hips. "Dante Valaresso, this even goes beyond what I expect from you!"

Dante and Serena sat up in bed, squinting at the beribboned fury before them. Dante shook himself awake. "Marissa, I swear nothing happened here." He glanced at Serena for confirmation and saw she was lacing up the front of her nightdress. "Almost nothing," he amended.

"Dante, I could beat you, I am so angry." Marissa's hands and arms flew as she dressed him down. "I would have Da Ponte call you out if I did not know you would kill him! First, you feed me your nonsense about the evil eye and trick me into giving that dinner. There you make it obvious to everyone that there is something between you two, and then

you go and burn down your house just to spread the gossip a little faster. Next, you break into my house in the middle of the night and loll about shamelessly in her bed well into the morning for all the gossiping servants to see. I am not one of those people who see widows as fair game for rakes. Your lack of discretion had better mean only one thing—that your intentions are honorable."

Dante swung out of bed and straightened his clothing. It was the first time he had ever spent a night in bed with a woman fully dressed and was rather proud of it. "Of course they are honorable, Marissa. What do you think I am?"

"Wait!" Serena struggled free of the blankets, sputtering, "I never agreed to marry you."

He shot her a quelling look "Of course you want to marry me. Don't be difficult."

"For your information, I have no intention of ever marrying again. No one. Not even you!" She poked him in the chest to emphasize her words. "I will be your mistress, Dante, but not your wife."

He gaped at her in complete disbelief. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I know the scandal will make it difficult, but it can work. I will live over on Burano or the mainland under an assumed name. You can visit me there."

Dante took her head between his hands and searched her face for signs of illness. "Are you fevered? Serena, you know that I can't keep a woman like you as a mistress."

"A woman like me?" she repeated. "Do you mean a respectable woman? I am not a respectable woman by any

stretch of the imagination." She delivered him a look full of meaning and warning. "As you well know."

Smiling tightly over her shoulder at Marissa, he said, "You exaggerate, *cara mia*. Our past hardly matters."

"Hardly?" In a carrying voice, loud enough to reach eavesdropping servants, Serena said, "Marissa, do you know how Dante and I first met?"

Dante grabbed for her, but she was expecting it and slipped around the end of the bed. "I sold myself to him on the street. He had me in an alley for a couple of coins."

Dante exclaimed, "That is not true!"

Marissa sighed in relief. "*Madonna Santa*, I should hope not."

Dante went on. "It wasn't just 'a couple of coins'! I gave you everything I had on me. Don't paint me as some skinflint who doesn't pay his whores."

"I beg your pardon," Serena bowed. "You are an exceedingly generous whoremonger." She began to laugh, great, joyous, whooping laughs, and Dante joined her.

Appalled, Marissa turned to Dante. "Please, tell me this is a joke."

But he ignored her, as did Serena, who wanted to know, "Tell me, Dante, why did you pay me so well?"

Dante matched her manic grin. "Because I had never felt so good inside a woman in my entire life."

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" Marissa held her hands up. "I do not want to hear another word. I am already forgetting all that has been said. I trust you two will sort this out in a dignified manner." Picking up her skirts, she headed for the door.

Before she was even out of it, Dante began to undress. He enjoyed seeing Serena's eyes go wide. She began to talk fast. He let her talk all she wanted.

"If I were to marry you, do you know what would happen? I would have to nag you to go to church."

He pulled his shirt over his head.

"And you," she continued, clearing her throat, "you would have to scold me about the price of sugar and for letting the servants cheat us."

He stripped off his stockings.

"Instead of doing what we want to do, we would have to spend our time among boring people nearly every night and we couldn't even sit together."

His breeches hit the floor.

"What is it you would rather be doing with me?" Dante purred.

Her eyes moved over his body frankly and at his question, the curling smile appeared. For the first time, he saw how the smile was matched by a suggestive lowering of her eyelids. He sighed in despair. That smile had been dangerous enough on its own.

"You are a strange one, Dante Valaresso," she murmured, sweeping her eyes downward. "Is this how you always conduct your quarrels?"

Dante was not quarreling, he was negotiating. He knew his strengths and her weaknesses and how much he would sacrifice to get what he wanted. For that reason, he would win. She would marry him. "Only my quarrels with you, Widow Alberenghi," he answered, raking her up and down

with his own hungry eyes. The sun passed through her light nightdress, illuminating the curve of her waist, the parting of her thighs. His palms itched to be on her. "I trust you are well enough?"

In answer, she peeled off her nightdress. She did not say she was too angry to make love with him or insist that they settle this marriage question first. For all her disguises, she was too honest a creature for that. That was one of many things he had realized since the fire. She always told the truth with her body.

In the fresh morning light, she glowed like an angel. Laying down on the bed, she reached her arms out to him. For a moment, he imagined what this morning would be like if she had not lived through the night. The pain of it almost made him sob. Swallowing that fear, Dante lowered himself over her, shaking with anticipation. An answering tremor passed through her body.

Before he kissed her, he breathed deep, taking in her scent, noting how she smelled like Marissa's soap behind her ear. Lower, between her breasts, she did not smell of soap—she smelled of Serena. Just Serena, not even linseed oil. Her scent was part of him now. He imagined he could track her through the city by scent alone, like an animal.

Under him, she hardly breathed. She waited. Very slowly, very deliberately, he brought his mouth to her throat. First, he tasted her skin, then he teased her with his teeth, and finally he sucked, knowing it would mark her, wanting to mark her as his. Her fingers tightened in his hair, her throat vibrated with a low moan.

When he released her throat and moved his kisses down her breast, she gasped, "Dante, I want to run wild with you. How can I do that as your proper little wife?"

He growled and redoubled his efforts to make her see sense. She continued more haltingly, "I want to make secret rendezvous with you ... maybe under a bridge ... or, ah ... back at Luigi's ... and ... oh! ... what of your revenge?"

Dante rolled so they lay on their sides, face to face, and hooked her leg over his hip. Lost in admiration of the smooth curve of her hip and bottom, he asked, "What revenge is that, my dear?"

"For tying you up," she said, breathless. "You promised to do all those things to me. Surely you could not do them in the sacred bed of marriage?"

Stunned, not to mention wildly aroused, Dante fought to keep his mouth from dropping open. Only a few thoughts traversed his addled brain, all of which were variants on a simple command to keep this woman close at any cost. He coughed, and just to be sure he understood her, asked, "You really want me to take you like that?"

"I thought of it constantly," she admitted, touching his lips, offering him her fingertips to suck. "That is, until I hated you. Then I only dreamed of it at night when I could not help myself."

"Dear God, Serena," he groaned, "what you do to me."

After that, there were no more words. As gently as he knew how, Dante made love to her. They remained on their sides, facing one another. He tucked her hair behind her ear so that he could watch every changing expression on her

face. This was something he had looked forward to for so long. He drew his fingers along her cheek, down her graceful neck, caressed her white shoulder. All the while she watched him with solemn blue eyes, watched him as closely as he watched her. When he cupped her breast, taking its weight, her eyes fluttered closed. He circled around the nipple with his thumb until it grew hard. Her lips parted and she opened her eyes to slits to watch him again. In his hand, her breast rose and fell with her quickening breaths.

"Serena." He dragged out the syllables because he enjoyed saying it so much. She hooked her hand around the back of his head and drew him in for a kiss, her mouth opening under his, drawing him deep. As they kissed, his hand slid around her hip to her back. Hand spread wide, he charted her supple spine, bending toward him even now, and brought his hand down over her flaring hips, the roundness of her bottom and along the satin back of her thigh, so happily hooked over his hip.

It took only the slightest movement for him to slide in on her welcoming wetness. The act was so familiar, so right, it felt as if he had been doing it for a lifetime.

When he first entered her, she bit her lip, but as he slid home, *the smile* appeared and a perfectly devilish light gleamed from beneath her lidded eyes. She circled her thumb around his ear as she had in the gondola. He did not know why she liked his ears so much, but he was so glad she did. Like sin incarnate, she began to undulate against him, squeezing him from the inside.

"Easy, let me do the work."

Worried that she was not rested enough, he wanted her to stay quiet. Or, he corrected himself with a twitch of his lips, as quiet as possible. He held her close, distracting her with deep kisses, grinding slowly against her—just enough to make her crazy. When she began to moan into his mouth, he reached down between her legs to tease her even more.

"Oh," she whispered. "I want that to go on forever."

"It can, if you like," he said, changing his touch.

Their slow joining did not go on forever, but the sun drifted across the bed, telling Dante that time was passing. Otherwise he would not be able to tell. There was nothing but slow rocking, satin kisses, soft moans. Serena.

In the end, she was on her back, remarkably quiet, her arms spread wide in complete surrender. Greedy, he watched every moment of her transformation. The creasing of her brow, her reddened mouth open in silent agony, the flush that rose to stain her face and breast. Slowly, magnificently, she arched up beneath him like a drawn bow. Her sea-blue eyes flew wide. For a moment they bore into his, and then they turned inward, going blind.

Gooseflesh sped down his back when she called out his name in her husky, aching voice. "Dante!"

Afterward, when they lay entwined and at peace, Serena rested one palm on his cheek and studied Dante. He returned her gaze, his entire expression soft as she had never seen it before. In the sunlight, his eyes were a warm, clear, brown, not nearly as dark as she had thought. Deep inside, she knew she would be learning to read these eyes for a long time. "Tell me what you are thinking," she asked.

"I was thinking what a perfect wife you will be for me."

Pained, Serena closed her eyes. "Dante, I..."

"Shh." He laid a finger on her lips. "One thing at a time.

Before you say you will not marry me, tell me first, when did you stop hating me?"

"It is hard to hate a man who has saved your life, you know." With a gentle smile, she brushed his hair off his brow. "But I think I stopped hating you before that, when I realized that my game had hurt you."

"I was not hurt," he said. "I was shocked, and angry."

In absolute disregard of masculine pride, she shrugged as if it were all the same.

He snorted. "Now tell me this, *cara mia*, when did you know you loved me?"

Serena stiffened. She wanted to run. Dante tensed too. She knew he was ready to pounce on her if she tried it. Slowly, she let out her breath and sank back into the pillow. For two or three heartbeats, she hesitated, but there was no denying the truth. He had her trapped. "Last night, as you kissed me."

Breaking into a triumphant grin, Dante kissed her and kept kissing her until she smiled like a fool.

"Very well, Signore Valaresso, tell me when did you manage to forgive me for my whoring and lying?" Though she meant to speak lightly, she stumbled on whoring.

Pain flickered in his eyes. "When I fought to save you from the fire, Serena, and I feared you might die anyway, everything became very clear to me. I understood that everything I had been angry about was meaningless. You are

not like any woman I've ever met, that is true, yet you fit me like no other could. You came to me like a gift, but I was going to throw you away out of pride." Taking both of her hands in his, he rushed on. "Thank God the house burnt. I would burn it down myself again if I knew it would bring me to the right way of thinking. I want you, Serena, as my lover and as my wife, as the mother of my children. Please say you will marry me."

Serena searched his face and saw nothing but sincerity. He did not offer marriage because he should, he offered it because he wanted her. He could have any lady in Venice and he wanted her. It was the worst possible thing she could imagine.

"I called you terrible names, I know. I even evicted you. I do not know how to make amends."

She shook her head and collected herself enough to speak. "I do not mean to be such a waterspout. Believe it or not, I rarely cry." She brushed her knuckles along his cheek and began to speak to him as if she were telling him a story. "For a long time you have been at sea, Dante, traveling all the world so that you could come home one day. Now you are here, ready to make a life for yourself on land. You want to surround yourself with a big family of your own and continue the Valaresso line." He nodded, encouraging her to go on. "That is why you cannot marry me. You see, I am barren."

His expression became very serious, very intense. She tried to meet his eyes and smile at him bravely. "So you see, you simply must marry someone else. It makes perfect sense." Her eyes drifted to the window, where she saw a

single gull beating its wings against a blue sky. "As I have said, I would rather be your mistress anyway."

"Do you know you are barren?" he asked. "Who told you so?"

"No, but I was a wife for seven years. If it were going to happen, it would have happened by now."

She saw his shoulders relax. "Serena, your husband was an old man." He kissed her hand. "And he was not a Valaresso. No woman can resist the seed of a Valaresso. It is a well-known fact."

That made her laugh. She sniffed and wiped her eyes. He pulled her close and added, "And this is another known fact. Women conceive when their lover pleases them. Did you know that? No? Well, there it is. Now you have no excuse not to marry me."

"But what if—?"

He stopped her question with his fingers and said fiercely, "No. There is no changing my mind on this matter. If the Valaresso line ends with me, it will end with a happy man."

The tears started again, but this time she smiled through them. "I do love you, Dante Valaresso."

He covered her hand in kisses. "Then let us console Marissa. Say you will marry me."

Serena saw the love shining in his eyes. She wanted to throw her arms around him and say "yes" a thousand times. What she actually said was a little different. "With all my heart. As long as you agree to a few conditions."

Dante groaned. A long, suffering groan.

"You must understand, Dante, the first time I married, no one asked my opinion on the matter at all. For seven years, I have promised myself that if I married again, it would be on my terms."

Impatient, he circled his hand. All he wanted from her was a simple "yes," nothing else really mattered, but his woman was full of strange notions. "Just what are these conditions, beloved?"

She sat up, tucked her legs under her, and folded her hands like a nun. A nun with spectacularly tempting breasts poking through her curtain of hair. "They begin with my good friend, Piero Lombardo."

"And what of that gentleman?" Dante grumbled.

Her face hardened, ready for a fight. "He has no intention of retiring."

"So you want me to marry both you and Lombardo? Fair enough, I will."

Blinking in surprise, she said, "That is all? You have no more objections? Is my painting career not offensive to you?"

Dante enjoyed her discomposure very much and thought of a way to increase it. "Serena, I am a man of business, and now I see in this Lombardo fellow a source of profit. I take it you have an arrangement with a dealer now?"

"Yes, he knows me as Signora Lombardo. Signore Lombardo is very reclusive, you see."

"I can imagine. Artists are such eccentric characters. How much of a cut does this agent take from your sales?"

"Fifty percent."

"This will be the new arrangement. I will represent "Signore" Lombardo to the public from now out, through my warehouses. In exchange for my professional services, I will take seventy-five percent of each sale."

Her mouth dropped open most charmingly. "Seventy-five percent! Fifty was robbery!"

"I will sell more of his work, at higher prices. Believe me, I will be worth my commission." His lips twitched as he tried to keep a straight face. "You see, now that I'm going to bankrupt myself rebuilding our palazzo, I have to exploit other income sources, like this one, just to be able to save enough for our daughters' dowries."

Then he saw that she also had to struggle to maintain her business-like demeanor. "I reluctantly agree to your outrageous terms on behalf of Signore Lombardo."

Dante crossed his arms behind his head, well content with this second round of negotiations. "Is there more?"

"Oh, yes. Next is the question of my freedom. I hate being locked up. If I am to marry you, you must guarantee me the freedom to go out and explore the city as much as I please, wherever and whenever I please—" She held her hand out to beg him be quiet long enough to finish. "—incognito, of course. I have no wish to embarrass you."

"What wife makes these demands?" He threw his arms wide in exasperation. "Where do you get these ideas?"

"Books," she chirped. "And that reminds me of another condition. I also expect that I will be allowed to read anything I like, and that you will not complain of the booksellers' bills. Dear Alberenghi never did."

He sighed in resignation. "The books I will not argue over. You are already so corrupted that it hardly matters what you read. As for the other, you may walk as you please, but only during daylight hours and with a footman behind you for protection. You may use your own footman for this, the one who threatened to smash my skull."

Serena nodded in eager agreement. "Then you must be the one to take me into the streets at night. You must promise me to do this, Dante."

He watched, fascinated, as her eyes darkened and her cheeks flushed with excitement. Abandoning her prim posture, she crawled over him and begged in her velvet whisper. "Take me out at night, Dante, to the places you would take a mistress. Take me to your box in the theater and slide your hand up my skirts. Take me to a low tavern where I can sit on your lap. Borrow one of your friend's *casini*, one that reeks of other lovers who have used it." She drew a long, broken breath as her imagination ran free and began to wake her body. "Take me into alleys and under bridges. Take me to dark places, beloved."

"I swear it, Serena." Dante reached between her legs. She was sodden and swollen from making love just minutes before and fever hot with fresh desire. He slid two fingers into her. She shuddered and her head dropped low. He curled his fingers, making a come here gesture.

Her head snapped up again, her eyes wide. "Do that again."

He did gladly. Sinuous as a cat, she leaned down so that her nipples brushed his chest and her lips moved just above

his as she spoke. "Only you can take me there, Dante. No one else."

A sudden vision came to him, a true glimpse of the future: the two of them running through the streets hand in hand, gleefully escaping a houseful of children for a long afternoon at Luigi's. He felt a beatific smile stretch across his face. She matched it. They understood one another completely. She would do whatever she wanted, and he would be so content, so blissfully sated because of this beautiful lunatic, that he would not care. Oh, he would argue with her now and then, just for the sake of form. Their future stretched before them, perfect.

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Postscript

As an engagement present, Dante gave Serena four of her own paintings, all that the boys had saved from the water. Beautiful as they were, ultimately her paintings were nothing more than planks of wood coated in oil, and three of the four survived their dunking without damage. They kept one to remind them of the view they would have once the palazzo was rebuilt, and the other two were sold for the dowry fund. Piero Lombardo's career continued to prosper.

In order to speed along reconstruction, Dante decided to return to the sea for one last profitable voyage. Of course Serena insisted on going with her husband. The respectable wives of Venice clucked at this news, and clucked even more when she returned to Venice a year later, burnt brown, radiant and big with child.

Around the same time, the reclusive artist Piero Lombardo began to offer a surprising new series of paintings of tropical shores. They proved even more popular than his views of Venice.

A little later, the Valaessos presented the city with their first son, Arturo Nettuno. They named him Arturo after his grandfather and Nettuno after the god of the seas who had blessed his conception. Prizzi spoiled him terribly.

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She'd love to hear from you.

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A summer of love, choices and changes...

Rosie's Promise

© 2008 Selena Kitt

Billy Ray and Rosie, each full of the promise of innocence and youth, want more than their rural Midwest home can offer. During this tumultuous Vietnam era, Rosie is excited to accept a scholarship to college.

But Billy reveals his defiance of his pacifist, preacher father by declaring that at the end of summer he will enlist to fight in the war.

With the realization looming that all they may ever have is this one last summer together, Billy Ray and Rosie explore their youthful love and passion. Rosie swears to wait for his return from Vietnam.

But only Fate knows how long Rosie's promise will keep her waiting in bittersweet vigil—and what the consequences of their actions might mean for their future.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Rosie's Promise:

"I got something to tell you." I swung his hand as we walked around to the high rows of corn. We were away from the sight of the house now, and I could barely contain my excitement. I'd been waiting to tell him for near a week.

"Lemme guess..." Billy Ray started feeling corn in its husks with his big, knowledgeable hands. "You're running away and joining the circus?"

I laughed, nudging him with my hip. "Very funny."

"You could be their living bookworm." He grinned as he broke off a fat ear of corn, still in its husk. "Blind as a mole from sitting under the covers reading until the wee hours of the morning."

"I got a full scholarship to USC." The words hung there for a moment before he swept me into his arms, swinging me around and whooping.

I laughed. "Put me down, Billy Ray."

But he wouldn't. He turned until we both got dizzy and collapsed, breathless, next to the cornfields. Here the grass was low and soft as velvet and we rested as we always did, side by side on our backs, watching summer clouds drift lazily by.

"So, what did *they* say?" He rolled and leaned up on his elbow to look at me. I knew my sundress was getting dirty and Mama would say something, but I didn't care. The way his gaze moved over me, as I stretched out next to him on the grass, made me feel like I had an itch I was desperate to scratch.

I grinned. "They said I could go."

"Hallelujah!" Billy Ray leaned over and kissed me lightly on the cheek, and I turned my face up to his in expectation. His eyes had turned dark and serious though.

"I'm real glad, Rosie." He played idly with the top button on my dress. "Not just 'cuz I know you'll be an amazing

teacher ... but it'll give you something to keep your mind busy while I'm gone."

"Gone?" I frowned. "Gone where, Billy Ray?"

He looked off into the distance. "I'm enlisting."

My heart stopped. I watched the wind nod the wild goldenrod. Finally, I asked, "When?" following his gaze, as if I could see what he was seeing.

"End of the summer." He pulled the piece of grass out of his mouth and tossed it aside. He didn't look at me, and I could feel him doing it on purpose, not meeting my eyes. I reached for his hand, then, finding and squeezing it. I couldn't talk around the lump in my throat. I wanted to ask "why" but I already knew. And there was no talking Billy Ray out of a thing once he set his mind to it.

"Don't know what's gonna happen, Rosie." He lifted my hand, still not looking at me, and turned it palm up in his. He kissed it, his lips soft, and then closed my fingers tight as if to save it there.

"You'll come home," I whispered back, holding his kiss in my hand and leaning my head against his shoulder.

He sighed. "I can't know that, and you can't know it either. All I know is that I want you, girl, and now all we got is this summer."

He kissed me—not for the first time, but it was like the last. It went on and on, our mouths raw and aching, our bodies strung like taut wire as we lay together on the ground.

There was no stopping what we wanted and we rolled together, pressing hard and rocking. He pushed up my dress, feeling past my panties, and led my hand to his zipper so I

could feel him, too, all hard and wanting me. His mouth was like moist heat, trailing down my throat as his big fingers slid into my wetness.

"Oh, Rosie," he groaned when I unzipped him, digging inside his jeans, seeking to free him. He reached down to help me, guiding my hand to the stiff length poking out above his zipper. His breath came faster in my ear as I tugged, his fingers probing up inside me. I squirmed against his hand, wanting more. He seemed to know it, his thumb finding that sweet spot at the top of my cleft and beginning to strum.

For a moment I forgot all about the hard length of him in my hand, and I moaned softly and rolled my hips in little circles. It felt too good for me to concentrate on anything else. Billy Ray's hips moved, too, reminding me, and I pulled him, up and down, making him groan with pleasure.

"Rosie, please," he begged, meeting my eyes. "Your mouth..."

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For her transgression, she will pay—with screams of forbidden pleasure.

The Pearl at the Gate

© 2008 Anya Delvay

After a lifetime of hard work, Captain Roake Barbenoir finally has all he has ever wanted. Wealth, social position, and the epitome of an ideal wife, the beautiful and well-born Jenesta. Of all his treasures, she is his favorite—a pearl, perfect and pure—and Roake vows never to tarnish her with the dark sexual knowledge he gleaned from a life at sea.

Yet every breath his sweet wife takes arouses an urge to watch her come apart under the onslaught of his passion. But she must never know of the lust-filled, almost demonic cravings fighting for release in his soul. To make her privy to them would be to lose her warm regard.

Each time Jenesta feels she and her enigmatic husband are growing closer, Roake withdraws behind a cold, unreadable mask. Perhaps if she knew him better, knew more of his past, she could learn how to win his heart. The answers surely lie behind the locked door of Roake's east-wing retreat. The one he has forbidden her to enter.

Jenesta's defiance of his one simple rule cannot go unpunished. For her transgression, she will pay—with screams of pleasure; sweet, exquisite pain; and perhaps with the loss of what she wants most. Roake, and his love.

Warning: No demure Regency here! Graphic and explicit everything, including language and sex of all varieties (as could be expected from an Alpha male more accustomed to bordellos than ballrooms) and, be warned, your grandmother's pearls will never look the same to you again.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Pearl at the Gate:

"What are these for?"

Roake couldn't answer Jenesta's soft question. Leaning back against the desk, his entire body shook with reaction, arms trembling so much he wondered if they would continue to hold him up.

She had taken his cock in her mouth. Sucked and licked it until he shot his seed into her throat. The memory of it, the residual effect of her inexperienced yet breathtaking act vibrated inside, keeping his cock hard.

Roake felt lost in a trance. The distance from reality had widened with each slap on Jenesta's arse, each answering cry of ecstasy. The sensation of her lips closing over his cock severed the connection completely. This must be an elaborate fantasy concocted by his overwhelming desire for her, and he never, ever, wanted to awaken.

Jenesta's scent permeated the room, clung to his skin, a combination of a light floral perfume and the musky, heady evidence of her lust. The heat radiating from his body seemed to intensify the fragrance, heightening the sense of urgency burning in his belly.

He could barely open his eyes. She was still kneeling at his feet, looking up at him, one of the straps held out in her hand. The leather lay across her palm, a vignette of contrasts

created to drive him to the edge of madness—dark on light, firm on soft, decadence against innocence all but lost.

And it was all his tonight.

How much longer before the dawn?

Strength flooded back to his body.

Roake straightened but still did not reply.

Jenesta allowed her eyes to slip lovingly over his body as she lowered her lids. He was magnificent—all golden-hued skin and hard-rope muscles, the erect flesh of his penis jutting dark and proud before him. Her palms tingled to touch him again. The taste of his seed lingered at the back of her throat. She revelled in the memory of his cock, like satin-sheathed iron filling her mouth, Roake's shout of bliss as his flesh expanded to shoot searing come deep into her. His loss of control re-ignited passion that had banked to a low shimmer after she found her own release.

Would she ever get enough of Roake? Could this desire ever be completely slaked, no matter how many times they returned to the well of love?

Jenesta trembled at the thought, a dark premonition of loss snaking into her soul.

Would he still desire her tomorrow, after he had time to think about what she had done? When it occurred to him how she had behaved?

Tears welled in her eyes, but she forced them back.

Live tonight without barriers, without fear. Tomorrow will take care of itself.

She raised her eyes to his again, held the piece of leather higher, and repeated, "What are these for?"

"They are restraints."

"Restraints?"

Roake nodded, gesturing to the piece of furniture he had uncovered earlier. "Yes, for use with the discipline couch."

Jenesta looked over her shoulder, understanding writhing to life in her chest with the blistering force of a firestorm. What Roake called the discipline couch appeared, at first glance, to be a narrow, malformed, cross between a bench and a four-poster bed. One end of the padded bench was short and flat, while the other side was much longer and sloped gently upward, away from where the two sides met. The entire strange contraption was set in an oversized framework of high uprights, with crosspieces holding them together. At intervals along the wooden beams of the frame were a series of hooks, some with lengths of chain attached.

Somehow she would be strapped to the couch, immobilized so she had no recourse but to submit to whatever he desired.

For one wild moment she considered fleeing. The idea of totally relinquishing her will to his thrilled and frightened at the same time. How could she trust him in that way?

Yet who was she to consider trust now? Had she not betrayed his when she opened the door to this room?

Jenesta sought his feelings in his eyes, but found no answer to the questions flooding her mind. Whatever his thoughts, Roake held them deep inside, masked behind a smoky gaze both penetrating and strangely distant. Yet determination tightened his jaw.

Roake would have his way with her body, whether she would will it or no.

Jenesta surrendered to the desire quivering and flaming through her. Trust could be earned or forever lost between them tonight, but she could not deny him, or the raging need he aroused.

Leaning forward, she picked up the remaining straps from the floor and held them out to him. Roake took them, his fingers lingering over hers, brushing gently over her knuckles. Love for him overwhelmed her, careened through her system with each beat of her unsteady heart. Then his hand slipped away and Jenesta rose to her feet to turn and walk to the couch.

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