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T. A. CHASE

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... It was a spectacle of grand portions. Men dressed in leather and fur. Women dressed in silk and lace. Costumes created from feathers, satin, and velvet. Every imaginable creature walked and danced in the ballroom. My eyes feasted on the noise and pageantry.

I lost touch with Jocelyn after five minutes in the room. The crowd of people was too big for us to stay together. I wandered, sipping wine and chatting with strangers. I tried not to stay with any group for too long. There was just so much to see.

Finally, I backed behind a pillar to get a breath. As cold as it was outside, it was roasting in the room. I sipped some more wine and stiffened as I felt eyes on me. Turning slowly, I froze as my gaze fell on a man standing near the doors opening into the garden.

I knew the figure was male by the sheer size of him. The top part of his mask was intricate gold swirling that almost formed a butterfly shape. The lower half was white porcelain with gold lips. I couldn't tell what color his eyes were. They seemed black holes, sucking my will into them. He wore a black crushed velvet cloak with a hood to cover his hair. A dark tri-corner hat sat on his head. His long legs were encased in black trousers.

He broke our contact to glance out the door, then he looked back at me. With a tilt of his head, he invited me outside. I didn't even realize I'd made my decision until I was halfway across the dance floor after setting down my glass.

As I watched, he slipped out the doors, and I gave chase, my heart beating as I stepped out on the verandah leading out into the gardens. Where would this adventure take me?...

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*Thank you to all my readers.
Every time you tell me you enjoy my books, you encourage me
to continue this amazing journey I'm on.*

CHAPTER 1

The stench of the dock drifted by my nose on the moist, cool breeze. I pressed my handkerchief to my face, breathing through it and hoping I wasn't catching any fatal disease. I knew if I came down with something, it would only increase my father's belief that I was a foolish child indulging in daydreams. I pushed away my father's voice in my head, telling me how crazy I was to go on the Grand Tour. Most young Englishmen of my age toured the Continent, sowing their wild oats and things like that, visiting several countries along the way. We'd already been to Spain, Prussia, France, and Greece, along with various cities. Italy was the last before we headed back home.

I chose to go to Italy, not because of some urge to bed as many women as I could before I went home to settle down with some

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woman my parents chose. No, I traveled to Italy because of all the books I'd read about Rome and Florence. But it was Venice I wanted to visit the most. The city of canals, *palazzos*, and Carnival. My excitement caused my hands to tremble. I only had one week left to enjoy my journey before I returned to England. There were so many things I wanted to see and do, but Richard, Viscount Freemont and my traveling companion, didn't seem as interested in my ideas.

"Bloody hell, Fishburne, why did you drag me here? Why couldn't we have stayed in Paris?" Richard whined as we stood by the railing, waiting for permission to disembark.

"You only wanted to stay in Paris because of that little opera dancer you took a fancy to. This is supposed to be our Grand Tour, Richard. That means traveling to different countries and seeing different things. Of course, you could have stayed there and I would have met up with you on my way back."

My friend shrugged. "I was getting bored with her anyway and my cousin is expecting us."

Meaning the opera dancer was becoming clingy and Richard would never even dream of making her his mistress, especially when he already had a one waiting back in London for him. I shook my head. I didn't understand why he would want to become entangled with women.

Females confused and scared me at times. I was afraid to touch them because they seemed so soft and fragile. I was convinced there was something fundamentally wrong with me. I had no urge to sow wild oats or chase the *demi-monde* like my friends. I longed to go places and learn new things.

Maybe the need to learn and discover grew in me as a child. Illness was often my companion and, to entertain myself while my

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siblings played outside, I would read the books in my father's library. Though they weren't children books, I still enjoyed them and they allowed me to take trips in my imagination.

"You may leave the ship now." One of the sailors nodded to us.

"Thank you."

We practically raced down the gangplank, eager to make Venice ours. While I might not understand Richard's fanatic interest in women, he was my friend, and I wanted him to enjoy himself.

"Richard, you bastard, it's good to see you."

A hearty voice rose above the confusion and noise of the docks. I looked up to see a giant man, who looked just like Richard, waving from the other side of the crowd. We pushed our way to him, and he swept Richard into a rib-crushing hug.

"It's about time you got your arse out here." The man grinned as he let Richard go. Swinging around to look at me, he stuck out his hand. "I'm Thomas Freemont, Richard's better looking cousin."

I agreed with that assessment, but kept my mouth shut while I shook Thomas's hand. "I'm Lord Clive Fishburne. Nice to meet you."

"Same here." He clapped me on the shoulder and almost propelled me into the seething mass of humanity milling around the docks. "Let's get out of here. You've come at just the right time. Carnival starts tonight and there won't be anything but wine, women, and song for the next week."

"Perfect." Richard poked my arm. "I shouldn't have doubted you when you suggested we come to Venice now."

"Great." My less-than-enthusiastic reaction went unnoticed by the other two.

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I followed in their wake, trying not to lose them, but also trying to absorb the atmosphere of the bustling city.

“Christ, Clive, I should put a leash on you or else I’ll lose you.”

Richard grabbed my wrist and yanked me over to where a rather grand gondola floated in the water. The gondolier offered me his shoulder to steady myself as I stepped onto the slightly wobbly surface. Richard and Thomas already sat, talking and laughing. I tried to sit farther away from them, not wanting to be distracted from studying the sights around me.

As we pushed off from the dock, I had the oddest sensation someone was staring at me. As casually as I could, I turned to look back over the group of people congesting the street leading from the wharf. One man caught my gaze, simply because he wasn’t moving. He stood still, and the people flowed around him like he was a rock in the middle of a running stream.

Dark brown eyes met mine, and a jolt hit me hard enough to make me gasp. Who was that man and why did my body react in such a way to him? I shifted, glad to be sitting with my jacket covering my groin. My prick ached all of a sudden, and I blushed, not liking the idea of what might have caused that. The stranger’s lips curled up at one corner in a mocking smile. It was like he knew what was happening to me.

I turned away, not wanting to be amusement for anyone. Part of the reason I’d come on this Grand Tour was to figure out why I didn’t enjoy the company of women. The sound of their shrill laughter or the overwhelming scent of their perfume never excited me as much as just one mere glance from a stranger over a crowd.

If I were to accept that my longings leaned more toward men than women, I had to accept I was an abomination. An offense against God and I could be killed for having such thoughts. Yet the

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God I'd come to know in my readings didn't seem so vengeful anymore. He seemed rather understanding and loving, even to those who sinned.

My head hurt and, sighing, I rubbed my forehead. It wasn't important to answer all my questions. I wouldn't risk being discovered to indulge my sinful appetites. I shot a quick glance over my shoulder back toward the wharf. The man still stood, tall and strong against the current, and something in me thrilled with the thought of possibly seeing him again.

"We're going to my *palazzo*. You can settle in, and take a short nap if you wish. I know traveling can be tiresome. We have invitations to several of the balls tonight. I'll provide you with dominos and cloaks. You both do have evening clothes, right?"

"Of course, no self-respecting Englishman goes traveling without evening clothes," Richard scoffed.

Nodding, I bit my tongue, wanting to ask to be excluded from tonight's festivities, but somehow, I knew it wouldn't be possible. Richard would drag me out of the *palazzo*, and no doubt Thomas would help him.

"I'm looking forward to participating in Carnival. I understand it's quite a spectacle," I managed to get out without choking.

"Oh, Christ, yes! The costumes, the food, the wine, and all the women you want." Thomas nudged Richard and gave me a wink. "Even those who aren't available will be available to a man in a mask."

"Yes, morals do seem to fly out the window when one doesn't know to whom one is talking."

"Bit of a stiff neck, isn't he?" Thomas muttered to Richard, but I still heard him.

"Oh, don't worry about Fishburne. He'll get into it once we get

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going. He's just tired. Got up early this morning to watch the ocean or some such nonsense."

Again, I didn't say anything. Richard didn't understand why I found everything about this trip fascinating, and that was fine with me. I'd rather he left me alone, instead of me being so entertaining to him.

"Here we are."

The gondola pulled up to a platform just below street level. A man in bright red livery tied the boat to the dock before offering a hand to help us out. Thomas strolled off, a man confident of his place in the world. Richard went with him, exclaiming over the enormous building Thomas owned.

"Thank you," I said to both the gondolier and the servant. I spoke Italian, having spent a year learning it when I realized I would be allowed to visit the country.

They looked surprised as they bowed. Whether it was because I spoke their language or because I spoke to them at all, I don't know. I just knew I couldn't be rude to people, not even those who were suppose to be beneath me.

"Fishburne, get your arse in here. Thomas has some tea ready for us." Richard's voice drifted down to where I stood.

"I'm coming," I mumbled, making my way up the stairs to the ground level of the *palazzo*.

My jaw dropped at the opulence evident in every item cluttering the hallway and the room I entered. Beautiful dark wood furniture filled the room and exquisite paintings hung on the walls. Where had Thomas gotten all these items? They had to be heirlooms. No upstart Englishman would have been able to collect all of them.

"I can see you're impressed with my artwork, Fishburne. My

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wife's family has been avid patrons of the arts for decades, and we have some wonderful examples. I'm sure Jocelyn would love to show you around some time."

I turned as Thomas spoke and found him standing next to a dark-haired woman, who looked just as regal as the *palazzo*. I should have known it didn't belong to Thomas. I strolled over to her and bowed over her hand.

"*Signora* Freemont, it's an honor to meet you. Thank you for allowing us to stay with you during our visit. Obviously, you are the jewel in your family's collection."

Her smile seemed genuine as she covered my hand with hers and said, "You didn't tell me you had such charming friends, Thomas."

Richard's chuckle sounded slightly strained. "I didn't know Fishburne had it in him to charm a lady."

"I'm Lord Clive Fishburne, and please tell me you will indulge me with a tour of your incredible *palazzo*."

Somehow Jocelyn knew I was serious and not just flattering her to get her into my bed. I could tell that by the gleam in her eyes. I did find her attractive, just like I did most women, but it didn't mean I wanted to share my bed with her.

"I can see we will become friends, Lord Fishburne." She tucked her hand in the crook of my elbow and led me to a small sofa where we sat.

She served us tea. Richard and Thomas chatted about family, and I learned Thomas had left England ten years earlier due to some scandal. He came to Italy to search for antiques to send back to his father. Instead, he met Jocelyn and fell in love. I stayed silent, studying the others. While it might have been love that got them married, it wasn't love that kept them together anymore. I

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could tell in the way she didn't touch him or really even smile at him. I was sure she probably could put on a happy face for their acquaintances, but maybe here in her own home, she didn't feel the need to pretend.

Oh, they liked each other well enough, but it was more a close friendship than any kind of romantic love. I wouldn't have been surprised to find out both had lovers, and it was okay with each respective spouse. It struck me as sad. While marriage wasn't an occupation I looked forward to, I still liked to think people stayed in love after being together for years.

I doubted my wife would continue to want me after our wedding night. I hated the thought I might hurt some poor girl like that, but while I couldn't indulge my sexual preferences, I didn't plan on making some woman believe I loved her to cover up my twisted urges.

"Enough chit-chat. I'm sure Lord Fishburne and Viscount Freemont would like to rest before dinner." Jocelyn stood, grace in every movement.

She rang a small silver bell resting on the teacart. A liveried footman appeared, and she smiled at me.

"Please show our guests to their rooms."

"Yes, *signora*."

"We'll see you at dinner, gentlemen. I have to make arrangements for your costumes."

I bowed to her and followed the footman as he led us up the sweeping staircase to the next floor. He opened the fourth door down the hall.

"This is your suite, Lord Fishburne."

"Thank you. I'll see you for a drink before dinner, Richard."

Richard nodded and moved off. I shut the door behind me and

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leaned against it with a sigh. I was looking forward to a short sleep before dinner. As much as I liked traveling, it took a great deal of energy for me to deal with all the changes. I wasn't sickly anymore, but I still wasn't strong, not like Richard or Thomas.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Startled, I straightened and turned to see a man step from a door on the right side of the room. Dressed in unrelieved black, he had to be my valet. My own valet chose to stay in England rather than tour the continent with me.

"Yes."

I unbuttoned my coat and turned, letting him tug it from my shoulders. He quickly helped me stripped to my drawers. He gathered my things and started to leave.

"Wait. What is your name?"

"Percy, my lord." He bowed.

"Thank you, Percy. Can you wake me in three hours?" I slipped under the dark blue velvet blanket on my bed.

"Certainly, sir."

Percy left, and I wiggled, trying to get comfortable in the soft sheets. I wrapped my arms around one of the pillows and buried my face in it with a sigh. I needed to rest because I got the feeling that, during Carnival, there was a lot of excitement and very little sleeping.

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The sound of liquid hitting a bowl woke me. I rolled over to spy Percy pouring steaming water into a porcelain bowl on the dresser across the room. He turned and gave me a slight smile before bowing.

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“Good evening, my lord. I hope you slept well.”

Stretching, I sat up and leaned back against the headboard. “I did. The bed was quite comfortable. Much better than those stiff racks on the ship.”

“Yes. Traveling, even with all the modern conveniences, still leaves much to be desired.” Percy gestured to the bowl. “I brought you some warm water to wash with. Unless you’d like a full bath. That would take longer.”

I shook my head as I climbed out of bed. “No. It’s all right, though I would like a bath tomorrow night.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll make sure that happens. I’ve laid out your clothes for tonight. *Signora* Freemont said your dominos and cloaks will be waiting downstairs for you when you leave.”

“Thank you, Percy.”

Washing quickly, I relished the fact I didn’t have a heavy beard. No reason to shave again. I liked a clean-shaven face, though it wasn’t in fashion. Percy wasted no time helping me dress. Within a half-hour, I stood before the mirror, checking to make sure I looked suitable for my first night out among Venetian society.

My black coat sat just right on my shoulders, tailored perfectly for my slender form. Percy tied a perfect simple cravat, on which I pinned my diamond-and-ruby stickpin. My black velvet waistcoat set off a pure white shirt immaculately. Discrete gold buttons gleamed on the velvet.

I wore black knee breeches, though Percy informed me I could wear trousers if I wished. I preferred them, but trying to make a good impression sometimes meant wearing items I didn’t particularly like. The trousers would be my chosen wardrobe starting the next night.

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Slipping on the gold signet ring I'd received from my grandmother, I deemed myself ready. After saying goodnight to Percy, I headed out into the corridor. A footman waited to escort me to where the others gathered.

As I entered the parlor, I saw Richard already working his charm on several pretty ladies, all of whom were probably married. Richard wasn't going to risk his freedom by seducing an innocent. I spied my hostess and wound my way through the small crush of people to where she stood. A tall, silver-haired man stood at her side, his hand on her waist in a rather proprietary way. So this was her lover.

"*Signora* Freemont, your beauty overwhelms me," I said as I bowed over her hand again.

"You are a rather silly man." She smiled her pleasure as she tapped me on the head with her fan. "But I thank you for the compliment. Donatello, I'd like you to meet Lord Clive Fishburne. He arrived earlier today with Thomas's cousin. Lord Fishburne, this is Count di Espenisa, a very dear friend of mine."

"Sir."

I inclined my head, and the count did the same. He eyed me, testing to see if I was a rival for his mistress's hand. I stayed relaxed, knowing he had nothing to worry about on that front. Jocelyn rose up on her tiptoes and whispered something to him. A knowing gleam came into his eyes and he gave me a friendlier smile.

"It will be nice to speak with someone new this Carnival. It always seems to be the same group of people every year. I swear I wish someone would do something scandalous, just to spice up the week." Jocelyn pouted.

"Would you run away with me then?" I teased. "I'm sure that

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would scandalize everyone.”

The count chuckled. “No one would be surprised by that. Jocelyn has always had a wild streak.”

I sighed. “Besides, I fear you’d become bored with me after a while, *signora*. I’m not very flashy or flamboyant. Rather a quiet country mouse.”

Jocelyn slipped her hand in the crook of my elbow again and did the same to the count. “While I might not be interested in a country mouse, I do know a few people who might be. Besides, it’s Carnival, my lord. It’s the week of excess and debauchery. Maybe the country mouse can learn how to have fun while he’s here.”

We laughed, though letting go and forgetting myself was as impossible as it was for me suddenly to want Jocelyn in my bed. We escorted her through the crowd, and she introduced me to several people before dinner. When it was time to sit, I escorted a pretty blonde woman into the dining room. Her name was Winifred and she was from Germany.

Dinner sped by with good food and excellent conversation. I flirted and teased, joked and charmed everyone around me. The wine flowed freely, and I imbibed more than I usually did. Yet why should I be cautious? It was a new experience and I wanted to live it as fully as possible.

Richard spent his time talking to a red-haired woman with a dangerously exposed bosom. I feared one wrong move and she would pop out of her dress. That was the attraction for Richard, of course. Thomas held court at the head of the table with two women at his sides. Donatello sat next to Jocelyn at the other end, and I noticed that, while Thomas and Jocelyn would smile at each other from time to time, there was no real jealousy as they flirted with their respective partners.

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“Come.”

It was an hour after dinner had concluded that Jocelyn gathered us all up and announced we were off to the first ball of the evening. A footman handed me a black wool cloak with a hood and a domino. I tied the half mask to my face and placed my top hat on my head. A secret thrill rippled through me. Once everyone was masked, unless I remembered what someone was wearing, I didn't have an idea who anyone was.

We piled into gondolas and the gondoliers propelled us off into the night. Jocelyn sat next to me, her white dress shining in the moonlight. She leaned over and touched my hand, drawing my attention. I turned to her, and Jocelyn edged closer, creating an intimate bubble around us. Donatello didn't seem to mind. In fact, he moved in such a way as to block anyone else's view of us.

“There are some people I'd like you to meet, Clive. Men who are interested in the same thing as you are.”

I jerked, but her grip on my arm tightened, not allowing me to move away from her.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Hush now. You and I will be friends, I believe, but first, you can't lie to me. My dear brother was of the same persuasion as you. I loved him dearly, and you remind me of him. So I would like to help you.”

“Help me? In what way?” I eyed her suspiciously.

“By giving you a chance to grow and learn about yourself. I'll open a world to you that you can choose to enter. A world where you won't get hurt because of your needs.” Jocelyn bit her lip and sorrow danced across her face. “I wish my brother was given a chance, but it wasn't meant to be for him.”

I patted her hand. “Thank you, *signora*, but I'm fine. I don't

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need any help.”

Her expression told me I was wrong, but she didn't argue. “Just let me introduce you to some of my friends.”

“All right.”

There wasn't any fighting her. Her determination to help me came from some misplaced guilt about her brother. I would let her introduce me, yet there was nothing promised about taking any kind of step into the world she offered up to me.

“Good man,” Donatello mumbled to me as we settled back into our original places.

All my worries shot out of my head when we approached the first *palazzo* of the evening. Gondolas lined up in the canal to offload elaborately dressed passengers. Plus carriages blocked the street in front of the *palazzo* as well.

It was a spectacle of grand portions. Men dressed in leather and fur. Women dressed in silk and lace. Costumes created from feathers, satin, and velvet. Every imaginable creature walked and danced in the ballroom. My eyes feasted on the noise and pageantry.

I lost touch with Jocelyn after five minutes in the room. The crowd of people was too big for us to stay together. I wandered, sipping wine and chatting with strangers. I tried not to stay with any group for too long. There was just so much to see.

Finally, I backed behind a pillar to get a breath. As cold as it was outside, it was roasting in the room. I sipped some more wine and stiffened as I felt eyes on me. Turning slowly, I froze as my gaze fell on a man standing near the doors opening into the garden.

I knew the figure was male by the sheer size of him. The top part of his mask was intricate gold swirling that almost formed a butterfly shape. The lower half was white porcelain with gold lips.

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I couldn't tell what color his eyes were. They seemed black holes, sucking my will into them. He wore a black crushed velvet cloak with a hood to cover his hair. A dark tri-corner hat sat on his head. His long legs were encased in black trousers.

He broke our contact to glance out the door, then he looked back at me. With a tilt of his head, he invited me outside. I didn't even realize I'd made my decision until I was halfway across the dance floor after setting down my glass.

As I watched, he slipped out the doors, and I gave chase, my heart beating as I stepped out on the verandah leading out into the gardens. Where would this adventure take me?

CHAPTER 2

Pausing on the stone steps, I let my eyes grow accustomed to the dark. While the stars sparkled overhead, they didn't shine much light down on us. There were candles burning to illuminate the pathways. I hesitated, not knowing which direction he'd gone in.

A stone skittered, and I whirled, chest heaving in fear. I'd never done this before. I'd never knowingly chased after a man. In England, I avoided such situations, but here in Venice, with the music and wine, something wild inside me demanded I go.

My heart skipped a beat as he stepped out into the candlelight and beckoned me to follow.

"Clive," Jocelyn called, but I ignored her.

The unknown stranger's body acted like a siren's call, coaxing me to come and catch him. I sent her a little wave to let her know I

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heard her, but there wasn't any way I was going to her.

I dashed down the stairs and into the maze, listening for his footsteps to guide me to him. I was so intent on finding him that I didn't notice when the footsteps stopped. I sped up, panicked I might have lost him.

I gasped as a hand emerged from the dark and jerked me into a nook cut into the hedge. It was just big enough for two people, as long as they pressed tightly together. The stranger wrapped his arms around me, cupped my arse, and crushed his lips to mine.

My first kiss from a man and my mind went blank. All I could think was how warm and moist his mouth was. How slick his tongue felt in my mouth and I couldn't fight him. While he invaded me, he clasped my wrists behind me with one hand, so I had no chance to touch him. I whimpered in protest. I wanted to learn the broadness of his shoulders and the curve of his shoulders. I needed to feel the softness of his hair.

"Hush now, little one. You'll touch me in time."

His hot breath washed over my ear, drawing shivers from me. Nudging my chin, he encouraged me to tilt my head to the side and give him access to my throat.

"Who are you?"

"You may call me Damiano. And you are Clive."

"How do you know my name?"

Uneasiness skirted around the pleasure Damiano built in me as he sucked on my neck, scraping his teeth over my vein.

"I asked until someone could tell me the name of the angel I'd found in the middle of Carnival. You should've been dressed in white wearing wings."

I snorted, amused for some reason by his passionate words. "No angel or decent man would be doing this," I whispered,

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arching up into his body.

He shoved me into the pillar supporting the ivy, and I gasped as he ground his pelvis into me. His hard prick rubbed over mine, and my head whirled with all the possibilities. I tugged at his grip, trying to get my hands free.

“No.”

Just one word and I stopped, frozen in place. The weirdest thought crossed my mind. If I disobeyed him, Damiano would leave and I didn’t want to continue living without ever knowing what it felt like to spend myself in his hand.

“Yes.”

“Good boy,” he murmured in my ear before licking along the edge and making me whimper again. “You are so responsive. I can see we’ll be having fun this week.”

Week? Did Damiano mean this would be more than just one night hidden in the garden? Could I dream of having a lover, even if it was only for a week? Would I get a chance to do things I’d only imagined and thought I would never experience?

I shuddered and sucked in my stomach as he fumbled with the buttons on my breeches. Damiano got them undone and pushed the fabric down before untying my drawers. Those were shoved down as well, and I trembled as the cool Venice air surrounded my rod.

Hard, warm flesh embraced me and stroked. I cried out silently as his rough skin worked over my sensitive shaft. Liquid leaked from the slit at the crown, easing his way a little. I might have tried to push him away as the feelings grew and almost became too much.

“Easy, Clive. Let go, and I’ll catch you. I promise I’ll always catch you.”

Damiano kissed me, taking my mouth like a conquering hero

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and demanding my surrender. My balls grew tight to my body and I found I had no choice. I closed my eyes and gave my pleasure free rein. Wine and the warmth of his body served to lower my inhibitions. I clenched my hands, but didn't try to move them again.

As he held me, I thrust through his fingers and my desire swirled until it exploded. Damiano swallowed my cries of completion as I spilled my seed all over his hand. He accepted all I had to give, never backing away or letting me go.

When I could open my eyes and breathe without moaning, he moved back into the shadows surrounding us. I couldn't make out any of his features, just the bright flash of his teeth when he smiled at me.

"Clive."

Jocelyn's voice drifted over the hedges, and I jumped as I suddenly remembered where we were. *Bloody hell!* We were in someone's garden, where anyone could have interrupted us. I scrambled to return my clothes to their proper appearance. I tucked in my shirt and straightened my waistcoat. After tugging my coat and domino back into place, I shot Damiano a look.

His deep chuckle enveloped me in heat, causing all my instincts to tell me to curl into him and let him shelter me. I shook myself. I wasn't some maiden looking for a protector. I was a man capable of looking after myself.

Damiano raised his hand and brushed his fingers over my cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Clive, where are you?" She drew closer.

He pushed me out of our hiding place, and I stumbled slightly before getting my balance. Shooting a glance over my shoulder, I couldn't see him, but his gaze weighed heavily on my back. I

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headed toward the noise and light of the ballroom. As I left the maze and stepped onto the stone verandah, Jocelyn strolled over to me.

“Where have you been?” She smacked my arm with her fan.

“It was hot in there, so I thought I’d come out to get some cool air.” I hoped she couldn’t tell I was doing more than breathing in cool air.

“Well, try not to wander off too much. We’re heading out to another ball. Thomas is meeting some of his friends at a different one. You’re more than welcome to come with Donatello and I, or go with Thomas and Richard.”

In truth, I didn’t want to go with either couple. I wanted to go back out into the garden and find Damiano. I wanted to discover what else he could show me that I’d only thought of in the secret depths of my mind.

“If you and Donatello don’t mind, I’ll go with you.” I gave her a brief smile. “I have a feeling the places Thomas and Richard are going won’t entertain me.”

She nodded. “I believe you’re right, which is why I told Thomas we’d take care of you. Donatello went out front to get a gondola for us.”

“Are you sure? I can go back to the *palazzo*. Please don’t feel like you need to interrupt your time together to escort me. To be honest, I’m still feeling a little tired from my journey.”

Jocelyn studied me with knowing dark brown eyes. Something flashed in her gaze, and I wondered if I looked ruffled or ravaged as I felt. I didn’t want to spend time with strangers making idle talk. I doubted I’d be very coherent after my experience.

“You do look tired.” She nodded like she’d made a decision. “I’ll send you home in my gondola. Donatello and I can take a

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different one.”

“Thank you.”

We made our way through the crowd toward the door leading outside. I searched the milling people, trying to see if Damiano had returned to the *palazzo* or if he'd slipped away like the figment of my imagination I was beginning to think he was. We said goodnight to our host and hostess.

Donatello waited for us on the platform, a gondola floating next to him.

“Donatello, love, would you have the footman get us another gondola? Clive is returning home. He's still recovering from his journey. I'm sure by tomorrow he'll be up to dancing all night with us.”

I nodded my thanks to the footman who offered his hand to help me into the gondola. I settled down, tucking my cloak around me in the chilly night air. I tugged off my domino and waved to Jocelyn and Donatello as the gondolier pushed away from the platform.

Floating down the canals, I stared at the brightly lit *palazzos* and wondered about the people in them. I waved to the couples crossing the bridges above as they called out to me. Music and laughter filled the night air, yet I felt like I was isolated, drifting along the edges of their world.

Our trip back to the Freemont *palazzo* didn't take long. After taking the stairs up to the ground level, I handed my cloak and domino over to the butler. I yanked off my gloves, stuffing them in my hat before setting it on the table in the hallway. One of the servants would take care of them for me.

As I wandered upstairs to my room, I untied my cravat and unbuttoned my waistcoat. I pushed open the door and stepped in.

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Most of my clothes found their way over the back of a chair and I stood in just my drawers when someone knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Percy entered, carrying a tray with a decanter and a crystal glass on it. “I thought my lord would like a brandy before he went to bed.”

“Thank you, Percy. I’d love one.”

While I sat in front of the fire and sipped the excellent vintage, Percy gathered my clothes in his arms.

“Would my lordship like me to get a night shirt for him?”

“No. I can’t stand sleeping in one of those. Feels like I’m being strangled. I’ll be fine. Why don’t you head to bed? I’ll ring for you when I wake up.”

“Certainly, sir.” He bowed before leaving.

I finished my brandy and considered having another, but a yawn interrupted me. It was time to go to bed. As much as I wanted to relive my experience in the garden, I could barely keep my eyes opened.

Stripping off my drawers, I slid under the blankets and wiggled around to get as comfortable as possible. The large mattress was far more comfortable than any I’d slept on during my tour. My eyes closed and I sank into dreams of my first kiss and first intimate encounter.

* * *

Waking, I lay in the bed, staring up at the dark ceiling and trying to figure out what drew me from my sleep. The hiss of cloth against cloth caught my ear, and I turned to see a black figure step from the window.

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“What the hell?”

I shot up in bed, glancing around to see in search of some kind of weapon I could use. The intruder strolled closer to me and didn't seem worried that I might defend myself.

“Hush, Clive. I couldn't wait until tomorrow to see you. I needed to taste your lips again.”

“Damiano?” I spoke softly, though there wouldn't have been anyone outside my door at that hour and I doubted any of the others had gotten home yet.

“Si.”

I started to climb out of bed, then, at the last moment, remembered I was naked. A blush filled me with heat. How foolish to worry about the man seeing me without clothes when he had held my rod in his hand earlier that night. Yet modest I seemed to be.

He came closer and what little moonlight seeped through the curtains showed me a strong chin and dark hair to go along with his dark eyes, but not much else. The dark was as effective a mask as the one he wore when I first met him.

“Will you welcome me into your bed?”

And there it was. My crossroads. Did I turn this man away, even though he had given me the best experience of my life a few hours earlier? Did I retreat into my shell of respectability and prison of self-loathing? Was I such a coward I would turn my back on the opportunity to discover the truth about myself, knowing I could never have more than this week out of time?

Yet the other path waiting for me spoke of passion and desire. Heat and lust. Emotions I never knew existed in the world I lived in. The journey Damiano offered teased me with possibilities of sweat, skin, and sex.

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Admittedly, I'd never been a courageous man, willing to tread upon unknown trails, yet the exotic scents drifting from him tempted me beyond reason. He stepped closer.

"No one will ever know. It is Carnival, Clive. A time for doing all those things you're sure God will punish you for. Yet how can two people loving each other be wrong, huh?"

Damiano's voice was devoid of an accent, so I wasn't sure whether he was Italian or some other nationality. Did it really matter?

I folded back the blankets, silently offering Damiano everything I was at that moment. For one week, before I headed back to England, I would taste all the forbidden fruits I always believed were beyond my reach. Learning would change me in fundamental ways, but I was willing to take that risk.

The rustle of clothing hitting the floor held my attention, and I watched as Damiano revealed his body to me. The darkness still kept his face in shadows, and I shivered as a hint of fear trickled down my spine.

What did I know about this man? He could seduce me, only to murder me in my bed. Yet I had nothing but my innocence to steal. Since he'd already entered the *palazzo*, if he were interested in robbery, he wouldn't be slipping into my bed.

His rough hand landed on my chest and he pushed me until I lay on my back. Damiano pushed the blankets back, exposing my nude body to his vision. I trembled, unsure of what to do. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to my ear.

"If you're unsure, just wrap your hands around the headboard above you. I'll take care of you. I know you don't have any knowledge of what men do in bed together."

Shivers wracked my body as he whispered. Moist heat danced

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over my ear and my prick throbbed with need. Wetness painted my stomach as my cock twitched in anticipation of his touch. I remembered how firm his grip was as he pumped my seed from me. I wanted more of that.

Damiano nuzzled a spot behind my ear and scraped his teeth over it, drawing bumps up on my skin as desire shot from that place to my groin. I moaned and he chuckled.

“Never knew how sensitive your body is to another’s touch, did you?”

I shook my head, not able to form any words that would make sense. He left a trail of wet kisses down my neck before biting the top of my shoulder.

“Oh, God.” I moaned, arching my hips off the mattress.

I wanted more of his body touching mine, or his weight pressing me into the bed. The simple connection of his lips on my skin drove me closer to the precipice, and I hesitated, not wanting to go over without him.

Crawling closer, he straddled me, his knees on the outside of my thighs. He ran his hands down my sides and back up to rub over my chest. I gasped as he plucked at the hardened nubs of flesh. It was like they were directly attached to my cock. After bracing his hands on either side of my head, Damiano eased forward in such away that his shaft rubbed against mine, making me cry out as what felt like electricity raced through me from the not-so-innocent touch.

Another cry escaped my lips when Damiano sucked my nipple into his mouth. Flicking it with his tongue and pinching it between his teeth, he tugged and licked, each action intended to drive me insane with pleasure. As he feasted on my nipples, he rocked back and forth, dragging our cocks together. At first, the friction

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bordered on pain, but as more liquid leaked from our slits, it eased the roughness, turning it into almost overwhelming passion.

“Ah.” I strangled on the word.

“Let go, Clive. Remember what I said—I’ll be there to catch you. Fall from the heights to which you’ve climbed.”

His harsh orders burned into my skin, and I groaned as I shot my seed all over our stomachs. Damiano kept moving until every last drop emptied out of me, then he brushed a kiss across my cheek before slipping away from me.

“But—” I stopped as he dropped in a crouch by his pile of clothes.

“Forgot this in the excitement of wanting to feel your entire body against mine. Roll over, love, and settle on your knees and elbows.”

I did as he told me, resting my chin on my hands and lifting my arse into the air. My cheeks heated as I thought about how wanton I looked, knees spread to give Damiano better access to the part of my body he seemed most interested in at the moment.

My muscles contracted as he ran one oil-slicked finger down my crease to my most private spot. I tensed as he rubbed over the puckered ring, but when that was all he continued to do, I relaxed and actually pushed back against his touch. It needed to be harder, deeper, or something. I didn’t know what I wanted, having never felt that way before.

I whimpered, and Damiano smoothed his other hand down my back, soothing me.

“Hush now. I’ll give you what you want.”

With each circle of my opening with his finger, he pressed in a little bit at time, lulling me into not noticing as he slid deeper. Suddenly, he stopped, and I shoved back, wanting the action to

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continue. I gasped as my movement caused him to bump something inside me.

“What was that?”

He laughed, but his amusement wasn't because of my ignorance. He seemed happy to be teaching me about the sensual arts.

“That's the one thing that will make you enjoy being taken by another man.”

He nudged it again, and I moaned. Lightning raced up my spine each time he bumped that spot. Nothing else played in my mind except the need to make the pleasure continue. He reached around me and wrapped my cock in his free hand. Soon I rocked between his hands, searching for the summit of the mountain I'd visited earlier that night. I wanted to go there again.

“Please, Damiano. Please, I need,” I begged, not sure what I needed, but wishing and hoping he did.

“Don't worry, my sweet.”

Damiano moved away from me to position his body between my legs. His warm hands ran over my backside before spreading me to look at my hole. Embarrassment swept over me, and I tried to pull away from him. He tapped me lightly.

“None of that, Clive. Every part of you is beautiful.”

Tension froze my nerves as he placed the flared head of his prick at my opening and began to breach my entrance. Nothing and no one had ever touched me there, but I welcomed his intrusion. The burn drove whimpers and moans from me. Damiano slipped into me like time meant nothing to him and the morning sun wouldn't dare climb above the horizon until he finished.

My sac tightened, drawing closer to my body the deeper Damiano went. I shuddered as he rubbed over that spot inside. My

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eyes rolled and I bit my lip to keep from crying out. The servants were probably asleep far on the other side of the *palazzo* or on the top floor, but I didn't want anyone who might be wandering around at night to hear me.

He thrust in and out, and all thoughts of anything else flew from my mind. All I could think of and deal with were the sensations of his rod filling my passage. He bent over me, enveloping me in his heat and musky scent. Damiano's movements sent him farther into me, and I cried out.

Without another touch, my prick spilled my seed all over the sheet beneath me. I shook and groaned, my arms struggling to hold me up as I plummeted down from the mountain of pleasure he'd created in me. My inner muscles clenched around him, not wanting him ever to leave.

Two quick strokes out and in, slamming his groin against my arse, and Damiano spent with a loud roar. I no longer cared who might hear us. Hot liquid flooded me, and I sobbed as he collapsed on top of me, shoving me into the mattress under me. Tears flowed down my cheeks.

We both sighed as he softened and slid from me. Damiano settled next to me and embraced me, pulling me onto his chest and kissing the tears from my face.

"Are you sad?"

I shook my head, struggling to find the words for what I felt. Up close, his face was rough-hewn with a beard gracing his square jaw. His dark eyes studied me.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Worry etched creases around his mouth. I shook my head again, still not having found the ability to make my tongue work.

"Ah, then it's okay." He nuzzled my sweat-dampened curls,

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and I shivered. “You must be getting cold. Get under the covers, darling.”

He climbed out of bed while I did as he said. I watched him pad over to the stand where the pitcher of water sat. Clearly unconcerned with his own nudity, he soaked a cloth and wiped his cock and balls clean. After tossing that cloth to the side, he grabbed another and wet it as well.

I didn’t avert my gaze as he returned to me and tugged the blankets from me. Damiano started to wash my arse and thighs. I blushed and tried to grab the cloth.

“I can do that,” I claimed.

Damiano grinned and rested his finger on my mouth. “A gentleman takes care of his lover.”

Blinking, I asked, “Am I your lover?”

“We’ve brought each other pleasure twice tonight. I do believe that makes us lovers. Also, I want to see you and make love to you again.”

“Okay.”

He finished cleaning me and threw the cloth over his shoulder toward the bowl on the stand. Neither of us paid any attention to where it landed. My eyes drifted closed as he embraced me under the heavy velvet blankets of my bed. I breathed in the sweat and sex smells lingering on the sheets. His heart beat loudly in my ear, and I allowed it to lull me into a sense of comfort and caring.

How could a stranger I met only earlier that night bring me to a complete disregard of all the things I believed true? Though it wasn’t talked about in my father’s house or polite society, I’d always believed the things we’d just done were wrong. Yet how could the joy and excitement I’d experienced be wrong?

Damiano didn’t hurt me or try to dominate me like I always

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imagined happened between two men. He treated me like a precious treasure, one he was loathed to break in any way. Should I have been insulted he treated me like I was fragile? No, because in many ways, I was innocent about what goes on between people. Having been ill most of my life, and taught by tutors at my father's country estate, I didn't have much interaction with other people. I didn't have much knowledge of how couples were to act toward each other in moments of intimacy.

If what we'd done was wrong, then I was damned because I wanted to take him inside of me again as soon as possible. His soft breathing soothed me and I drifted asleep, tired for the first time because of activity, and not because I was ill.

CHAPTER 3

The sounds of my curtains being drawn back woke me the next morning and I shot up in the bed, remembering at the last moment that I was naked. I caught the blankets to my chest and glanced around me. Damiano was gone and Percy turned to look at me from where he stood by the windows.

“Would you like a tray brought up for you, sir?”

“Uh, no, thank you, Percy. I’ll get dressed and go downstairs. Are the others up?”

“Lord Freemont has not returned yet. Signore Freemont is still abed, but *la signora* will be making her way down to the breakfast room in a half-hour or so.”

I shoved a hand through my unruly curls and grunted. “What time is it?”

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Percy paused from where he gathered some fabric from the floor. “It’s eleven, sir.”

My cheeks heated when I saw what he held in his hand. He didn’t say anything, though I swore there was a knowing glint in his eyes. That could have been my guilt talking. I washed with the hot water Percy had brought with him and let him dress me without saying anything.

As I walked down the sweeping staircase, muscles I’d never used ached and I hoped no one would notice that I walked rather oddly. One of the footmen waiting at the bottom of the stairs pointed me in the direction of the breakfast room.

Entering, I noticed Jocelyn sat at the end of the table, head bent in an intimate conversation with Donatello. I wasn’t surprised to find the count there. My surprise came from seeing they had a visitor. I paused just inside the room. Jocelyn looked up and smiled at me.

“Ah, Clive... just the person we were waiting for. I was about to send one of the footmen up to see if you were awake.” She waved me into the room.

I approached the table, and her guest stood, turning to face me. When his dark eyes met mine, my mouth fell open and I froze, attraction racing through me unexpectedly.

“I wanted you to meet a friend of mine. Lord Clive Fishburne, this is Lor—”

“Damiano.” He bowed to me, sending a sly wink my way as he politely interrupted her.

“Damiano.” Jocelyn motioned to the table. “Please join us. Damiano has volunteered to show you around Venice. That way, you aren’t alone while you wander because I very much doubt Richard will be interested in seeing the city.”

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Snorting, I broke out of my shock, and sat. The footman dished out some breakfast for me, and I nodded my thanks.

“Percy said Richard hasn’t made it home yet. I guess we’ll see him at some point today. Hopefully, he’ll show up before we have to return home. I would hate to have to explain to his father that I lost him during Carnival.” I took a sip of my coffee, a drink I had had before at a shop in Paris.

“I’m more than willing to share my lovely city with you, Lord Fishburne.” Damiano flashed me a friendly grin.

“Please, call me Clive.”

Why did he not want me to know his full name? That question raced through my head, but I found I didn’t really care. Spending time with him excited me. I would be spending my days with a handsome companion, and maybe my nights with a mysterious lover.

“Did you have fun last night? There’ll be more balls and fetes tonight. All week actually. I’m happy to put one of my gondolas at your disposal,” Jocelyn offered.

Before I could say anything, Damiano spoke up. “I will take it upon myself to ensure Clive is entertained while he’s in our beautiful city.”

“I just bet you will,” Donatello commented, a smirk tipping the corners of his mouth.

The knowing tone in his voice brought a blush to my cheeks. I ducked my head and took a bite of my food. I wasn’t used to anyone knowing what I might have done and feared they would say something to others, though Jocelyn had said she wouldn’t.

Sharing my perverse needs with anyone terrified me. It was one thing to do what we’d done in the dark with only Damiano and me knowing. But to bring it out into the bright light of the day struck

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me as foolishness. My fork clattered against my plate and I set it down, not wanting to draw more attention to myself.

Jocelyn leaned over and slapped Donatello's arm. "Stop teasing. Clive isn't used to your games. Leave him be and don't annoy Damiano either."

She graced Damiano and me with a soft smile. "You're welcome to treat my *palazzo* as your home, my friends. You are safe here. There'll be no judgment. How can I judge when what I do could condemn me as well?"

Judging others when they themselves were sinning never seemed to bother the people I knew. Damiano shifted, drawing my attention to him. I met his gaze and I saw understanding in his eyes. He seemed to know how difficult this all was for me.

Maybe Damiano never had to worry about what people thought of him. His clothing and manner spoke of money and high society. He didn't want me to know, but I could tell he was nobility. More likely, he was the first son, so people would give him more leeway because of his money and position. Never having to prove himself to anyone, he never had to worry about having approval taken away.

Damiano started a conversation about people I didn't know, and while some might have considered it rude, I relaxed. I wasn't good in company, having grown up alone and without much interaction except for my tutors and the servants.

I finished my breakfast quickly and was shocked by how much I'd ended up eating. I never had a big appetite and I found that often being sick took much of my hunger away. The muscles in my legs and lower back ached. Maybe my strenuous exercise the night before added to my need for food. I pushed my plate away from me and picked up my cup to sip at my coffee.

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“Are you done?”

Glancing up, I spied Damiano resting his elbows on the table and staring at me. I bit my lip and nodded. Was I ready to spend the day with the first man I’d ever shared my body with? I knew we had to be circumspect and couldn’t do anything more than see the sights.

“Yes.” I stood and bowed slightly to Jocelyn and Donatello. “Thank you for the wonderful breakfast, *Signora* Freemont.”

“You’re welcome, Clive. Go and enjoy our lovely city. You’re safe in Damiano’s care. Perhaps we’ll meet up at one of the balls.” Jocelyn shoed us out of the room. “If Richard asks about you, I’ll let him know where you are.”

“Thank you. *Signore*.” I bowed to Donatello before I left.

Jocelyn’s butler waited out in the foyer, holding my great coat. After I slid it on, he offered me my top hat, gloves, and cane. By the time I was ready, Damiano was as well. He gestured for me to walk out first. I left and stood on the platform.

“I thought we could take a ride on the canals. It’ll give you a chance to see some of the wonderful architecture.”

His gondolier stood so I could use his shoulder as a brace as I climbed into the gondola. Damiano joined me and we settled down in the luxurious blankets spread on the bench. There was still a cool chill in the air, and I shivered slightly.

Damiano shifted a little, bringing our shoulders closer.

“Antonio, take the long way to St. Mark’s Square. My guest would like to see some of the beautiful *palazzos* of our neighbors.” Damiano flashed a quick smile over his shoulder toward the younger man at the back of the gondola.

“*Si, signore*.”

Tension stiffened my body. I’d never stayed this close to a man

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I found attractive. I feared I would give away my unnatural urges and they would condemn me. In my own country, I could be hanged or imprisoned for being a sodomite.

Yet the warmth of his body leaning against me eased me in a way I'd never felt before. We floated down one of the canals, and I studied the elaborate bridges connecting one side of the street to the other. The craftsmanship amazed me, and I pointed out one to Damiano.

"Do you know who built this bridge?" I motioned to the one we were going under.

Damiano's narrowed gaze peered into the shadows above us, and he grunted. "I might know. Would you be interested in meeting him? Or any of our artisans? We have several workshops I could probably get you into if you wish."

Did I want to visit them? Would it bring me more time with Damiano? I found myself not wanting to leave his side.

"Would you be visiting them with me?" I bit my lip, silently berating myself for asking.

His smile brushed against my cheek as he leaned even closer to me. I shivered as his coffee-scented breath played over my skin.

"I'd be happy to escort you anywhere, Clive, though I must be honest with you. I would prefer to take you to my bed instead of showing you the city."

He picked up my hand and rested it on the bulge in his pants. I started to jerk away, but he kept me there.

"Antonio pays no attention to what we do," he whispered into my ear. He rubbed the palm of my hand against his hard length. "Come to my *palazzo* and spend the afternoon with me in my bed."

Shaking my head, I stammered, "It's not right. It's against the law."

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“Whose law? Society’s?”

I nodded, and he angled his body toward me, surrounding me in some ethereal way. I inched into his space. I fought the urge to climb onto his lap and press my face into his neck.

“Society cares only for creating members who are the same. They don’t understand being different or wanting to stand outside their restrictive rules. They want everyone to be like them.” Damiano frowned. “It’s hard to break out of their expectations, but when you do, the rewards are so much more than you ever imagined.”

“If someone found out, we could be hanged.”

He shrugged. “True, but I’ve never lived my life to please others.”

I chuckled. “You’ve never had to live on the goodness of others, have you? Your money isn’t reliant on other people’s good will.”

“No. My money comes from an older aunt, but it doesn’t matter. I won’t live my life to please others.”

“You’re stronger than I am,” I murmured.

“Clive, you can be strong. You just need someone to hold you, and I’d like to be that person.”

Staring at Damiano, I wanted to press my mouth to his thin lips. My rod stiffened and I coughed to clear my suddenly dry throat. Damiano seemed to read my mind.

“Antonio, disregard the tour. Take us home as quickly as you can.”

“*Si, signore.*”

My face burned with embarrassment, yet excitement shot through me. I longed to be embraced by Damiano again. To feel his naked body against mine, and his prick inside me. No longer

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being innocent about what goes on in a bed, or anywhere else, considering what he did to me in the garden the night before.

Our gondola slid to a stop at the dock of another large *palazzo*. This one reeked of age and money. Damiano's family must have lived in Venice for several centuries longer than Jocelyn's family.

A footman helped Damiano out of the boat, but stepped back as Damiano offered me his hand. I took it, and he supported me as I climbed out, but didn't let go of me when we walked into his home. A butler took our things, and Damiano put a foot on the bottom stair before turning to hold his hand out to me.

Again, I was at the crossroads. It was one thing to welcome Damiano into my bed during the dark of night. It was something different to give him my hand and go up to his room in the middle of the day when his servants knew what we were doing.

Damiano didn't speak. It was my own decision to change my life even more than I already had. I clasped my hands together as my thoughts ran around in my brain. No one back in England would ever find out what I'd been doing in Venice. Richard wouldn't even know because he would be doing the same, only with women.

Glancing around, I noticed we were alone, and I met Damiano's gaze again.

"I won't force you, Clive. You make the decision you can live with."

I had never been very brave and finding others with the same inclination as myself in London would be difficult for me. Taking a step forward, I laid my hand in his. My trip was about discovering new things and experiencing situations I wouldn't be able to enter into when I was in England. Trust wasn't something I gave easily, yet somehow I understood that Damiano wouldn't

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betray me. It wasn't just my secret, but his own he would be exposing, and no matter how much he might not care what others thought of him, he wouldn't destroy his own reputation to hurt mine.

"Thank you," he said softly as he led me up the sweeping staircase.

We made our way down a dark hallway to two large doors at the end. They were elaborately carved with angels and what I could only assume were demons fighting. I reached out and ran my fingers over one of the raised wings.

"This is beautiful."

Damiano smiled. "Yes, it is. My family was lucky to have patronized a talented young carver. He did all of the carvings in the *palazzo* and my country home. Maybe I could take you there someday."

"I would love to see it."

There was no hesitation in my voice, simply because I knew it would never happen. Our time together would be short and burn like a shooting star flashing across the night sky. I wouldn't be in Venice long, and even if I were, I was sure he wouldn't want to spend time with me outside of his bed, no matter what he told Jocelyn. I was a rather bland Englishman, nothing to redeem me beyond my relative innocence in all things carnal. Seducing me was, in many ways, a game for him, I feared, and while I would willingly accept all the lessons he gave me, I couldn't risk my heart.

I gave myself a mental shake. No one said anything about love. It was about rutting and sex. It was bringing each other to completion in all possible ways for as long as the lust lasted. After which I would go my way, and Damiano would go his. He

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probably had a wife back at the country estate, raising his children while he dallied in the city.

“Are you married?” My question escaped my mouth like a horse dashing from the barn.

He stopped in the midst of opening the door. Turning, he looked at me with a faint smile on his face. “No, I’m not married, Clive. Nor do I ever intend to be. I have nephews who will inherit my fortune. I have no interest in women, except as friends and beautiful objects to look at.”

“Oh.”

Now I felt foolish for asking. Damiano cradled my face in his hands and stared into my eyes with an intense gaze.

“If I had said yes, would you have left me?”

I shrugged, as uncomfortable with his question as I was with my answer. “No. We’ve already shared our bodies once, so wouldn’t it make me a hypocrite if I were to walk away now?”

Damiano’s laugh filled the room around us and I smiled at the sheer joy in it.

“My dear Clive, we are all hypocrites at one point or another in our lives. I might be a perverted sodomite to many people, but I do have morals and ethics. If I were married, I wouldn’t cheat on my wife, whether I loved her or not. The bonds of marriage are sacred and shouldn’t be treated as lightly as some of our friends treat them.”

He was talking about Jocelyn and Thomas, and hundreds of the others who moved in the highest circles of society. I understood what he meant. Not even my parents stayed true to their vows. Oh, I didn’t think Damiano was a saint or anything like that. He enjoyed his carnal pleasures too much, but when he gave his word, he believed in keeping it. Strange how I knew that about him, even

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though I knew nothing else about him.

I let him drag me inside his room and shut the door behind him. As the lock clicked shut, I relaxed. It didn't matter if his servants knew what we were doing in there. I could convince myself that we were locked away from the rest of the world and no one would ever know what happened between us in his room.

Damiano advanced on me like an invading army. Before I could get my mind wrapped around the idea of us sharing our bodies again, my jacket, waistcoat and shirt were in a pile on the floor. He struggled with the buttons on my breeches, and I laughed.

"Why don't you work on your own clothes while I finish undressing myself?" I gave him a sly look. "Unless you've never undressed yourself before?"

He winked at me. "I have a lot of experience undressing myself and others."

I blushed and ducked my head. Of course, he was experienced. Broad, engaging, and bold, Damiano shone brightest against the riot of color and exuberance that was Carnival. People would flock to him, and I was one such creature, drawn to him by his sheer joy of life.

He placed one knuckle under my chin and lifted until my gaze met his. "When we are together, Clive, you are the only one I think of. It doesn't matter whom else I might have been with before now. You are all I see."

There were pretty words, and though I knew he was probably saying them to make me feel unique or special, I accepted them. I kissed his fingers before stepping back to continue undressing. I got my breeches undone and shoved them down with my underclothes. Within moments, I stood before him, naked as the day I was born.

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“Oh, you are beautiful. I thought that the first time I saw you.”

Damiano stalked toward me, his naked chest calling to me. I reached out and stroked my fingers through the hair lightly covering his chest.

“How could you have known what I looked like?” I remembered last night. “I wore a mask and a cloak. There wasn’t any way you could have seen my face.”

“I was at the docks when your yacht arrived. I spied you and your friend standing by the railing and something told me I needed to find you again. That for the first time, someone had sailed into Venice who I wouldn’t want to sail away.” He dropped his gaze for a moment, seemingly embarrassed by his confession.

“How would you know? You simply saw me for a few minutes.” I scraped my thumbnail over his nipple.

He shivered and eased closer. “It might sound strange, but I felt it in my gut when I met your gaze for the first time.”

“Ah, I’m sure that was just lust.”

As I leaned forward to flick my tongue over that hard nub of flesh, I wondered where my courage came from. It wasn’t like I knew what I was doing or how to seduce a man, but some instinct told me what to do. I stepped closer until our bodies touched from chest to knee. Excitement raced through me as the fabric from his breeches brushed against my groin. I slipped my hands up over his shoulders and into his hair. He grinned at me as I angled his head for my mouth.

Our lips met and I relived the amazed emotion I’d felt the first time he kissed me. I never knew a kiss could have so much feeling to it. Of course, I’d never kissed anyone, not even a girl. He grabbed my arse with his strong hands, crushed our groins together, and drew a gasp from me. He took advantage of my

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surprise to dip his tongue inside my mouth. I shuddered as his fingers trailed down my crease and his tongue teased alongside mine.

He nibbled along my bottom lip, and I whimpered. I had no dignity left, just the overwhelming desire to feel his entire body naked against mine. I dropped my hands and started tugging at his clothes. He chuckled and stepped away.

“Climb on the bed,” he ordered, and I obeyed.

I crawled on the bed and knelt on the covers, watching as he stripped off the rest of his clothes. I licked my lips as his prick appeared. Damiano saw the direction of my gaze and he gripped his shaft.

“Would you like a taste of me?”

My dry throat kept me from answering aloud, but I nodded. He pumped up and down, liquid glistening on the head, his foreskin pulling back away from it.

“Lie back.” He gestured toward the head of the bed.

I lay on my back, head on the pillows. He joined me on the bed, settling his knees in my armpits. He rubbed the wet head of his cock against my lips, and I licked it as it passed by. He braced one hand next to my head and fed his prick into my mouth a little bit at a time.

He moved slowly, not forcing me to take it all at once, for which I was thankful. I sucked and licked, doing my best to bring him pleasure. Damiano caressed my face, tracing the arch of my eyebrow and the hollow of my cheek as I sucked.

“Would you like to take me, Clive? To know what it feels like to have your rod buried deep inside a man?”

My eyes widened and I looked up at him. I never thought he'd let me take him. I eased his cock out of my mouth before I nodded.

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“I’d like to try, if it won’t hurt you.”

Damiano chuckled. “Did it hurt when I took you?”

I shook my head, and he handed me a bottle.

“Pour some of this in your palm and coat your cock with it. I’ll get myself ready. Next time, I’ll show you how to do it, though I’m sure you could figure it out for yourself.”

I did as he told me, and after putting the top back on the bottle, I set it aside. He braced his hand next to my head and lifted his rear up in the air, reaching behind with the other hand. His eyes closed, and I moved to the side, wanting to see what he was doing.

His fingers sank into his arse, thrusting in and out. My shaft hardened even more until it throbbed and ached. I trailed my fingers over the curve of his buttocks to rub over the ring of muscles enveloping him and slid over his fingers as well. He moaned, and I pressed a kiss to his chest.

“Are you okay?”

Damiano nodded and removed his fingers before gesturing to me. I positioned my prick at his opening and I bit my lip as he sank down onto it. I closed my eyes and absorbed the feelings of being surrounded by the most amazingly tight heat. He clenched his muscles and a moan escaped me.

“It’s quite marvelous, isn’t it?”

All I could do was nod. He braced his hands on my chest before he rose, allowing all but the head of my cock to slide out. Slipping back down, Damiano drew a groan from me.

“Are you ready?”

I peered at him and grunted, unable to form words in my mind or on my tongue. What more did he have in mind than what we were doing? He gripped my hands with his and rested them on his hips. It was my job to support him while he rode me. Awestruck, I

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stared up at him, his skin, drenched in sweat, glistening in the afternoon light.

He let go of my hands and pushed up again. This time, I lifted my hips to meet him as he slammed back down. No gentleness touched our coupling that afternoon. It was rough and quick. There wasn't any elegance or rhythm to our movements.

My hold on his hips couldn't be maintained, so I wrapped one of my hands around Damiano's prick, stroking in time with our coming together. He swelled in my fist, and I firmed my grip until it had to be painful for Damiano, but he never spoke a word, just kept moving.

"I'm going to spill soon," Damiano warned.

Still not able to talk, I dropped my chin, letting him know I understood what he meant and I was on the edge myself. Tension built throughout my body, pooling at the base of my spine. I slowly lost my rhythm as the need to bury myself as deep as possible into Damiano grew. My grip on his hips tightened, and I knew he'd be bruised later.

"Damiano," I forced out as my eyes rolled back in my head and I flooded his inner passage with my seed.

"God, Clive," he shouted, coating my stomach with his own spend.

I opened my arms as he collapsed, encircling his shoulders and holding him close. I ignored the sticky mess between us. He nuzzled his face into the crook of my neck, and I rubbed my cheek against his sweaty hair. No more words were exchanged as our heartbeats slowed.

When Damiano regained his strength, he climbed off me and went to the dresser, where a bowl of water sat. He dipped a cloth into it before he washed. I lay on the bed, finally free to study

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another man's body without fearing the repercussions if I was caught.

Damiano was solidly built with broad shoulders and a wide chest. A thick mat of hair covered his chest, trailing down to the dark curls around the base of his rod. He hadn't let his physical state deteriorate as he got older. Most men with his money and position in society spent too much time drinking and not going to bed until the sun rose.

I blushed when he turned and caught me staring at him. His gentle smile eased my discomfort. After coming back to me, he wiped me down while I avoided his gaze.

"I'm your first lover, huh?"

"You know that. It's not like I'm knowledgeable in the carnal arts, as you can tell." I turned my head away from him, embarrassed by my lack of experience.

He tossed the cloth on the floor and straddled my hips again. Damiano cupped my face with his hands, forcing me to meet his eyes.

"I'm honored that you chose me to educate you in all things pleasurable. You have nothing to fear from me, Clive. I will never share your secret with anyone else." He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. "Now I think I'm ready to rest for a little while. If there's time later on, I'll take you to one of the artisans I support. He is a brilliant glass maker."

Excitement coursed through me, not only at the thought of being able to see a true artist at work, but also Damiano's touch. He settled under the blankets behind me, wrapped his arm around my waist and brought my back to his chest. He rested his face against the back of my neck and sighed.

I relaxed, letting my eyes drift shut. I never thought I'd be

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comfortable sharing my bed with another person, yet having his warmth at my back gave me a sense of safety and warmth. I let any worries I had slip away to be examined at a different time.

CHAPTER 4

A discreet knock on the door woke us. I rolled onto my back and tugged the blankets up to my shoulders, while Damiano stretched, bidding whoever stood on the other side of the bedroom door to come in. I hid my face in the pillow, not wanting to see the look of disgust on the servant's face.

“Thank you for waking us. We can dress on our own. Have the gondola ready. I must return Lord Fishburne to the Freemont *palazzo*, so he can get ready for the balls he must attend tonight.”

“Certainly, *signore*. I have brought warm water to wash with.”

I waited until the door closed behind the valet before I uncovered my face and sat up in bed. Damiano climbed out of bed and, unconcerned about his nakedness, strolled over to the basin and washed. I moved to the edge of the mattress and noticed my

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clothes were laid neatly over the back of a chair. Someone had come into the room while we slept to neaten up and ensure my clothes weren't wrinkled.

Damiano saw my concerned look and glanced toward my clothes. "Don't worry, Clive. None of my servants would talk about what happens in my home. They are loyal."

I stayed silent, not convinced. I had never inspired any such loyalty in my parents' servants. They wouldn't keep any secrets of mine. After Damiano finished, I washed and dressed. He embraced me and kissed me, his tongue plunging into my mouth and stroking along my teeth. As I accepted his invasion, my prick hardened and I pressed tight to him. He slid one of his hands down to my arse where he squeezed my flesh.

We broke apart when another knock sounded on the door. "The gondola is ready, *signore*."

My chest heaved as I stepped back. Damiano licked his lips like he wanted to capture the entire flavor he could from my mouth.

"We'll be right down."

"*Si, signore*."

We tugged and straightened our clothes. We strolled down the stairs to the foyer where a servant stood, holding our overcoats and hats. After pulling on our outer garments, Damiano led the way to the canal. Settling in the gondola, Damiano ordered the gondolier to take us back to the Freemont *palazzo*.

"We don't have time today to visit any artists, but if you wish, I'll take you tomorrow." Damiano tucked a blanket over our legs and held my gloved hand.

"I'd enjoy that. I'd like to pick up some glass for my mother." I tried to send my parents a gift from each country I visited. I

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thought I should show some appreciation since it was my father's money sending me on this Grand Tour.

"Does your father enjoy wine?"

I shrugged. "I don't think he cares as long as it's expensive."

Damiano chuckled. "Ah, then I know just the wine you should send to your father. It tastes exquisite and is very expensive."

"That will work for him."

We traveled down the canals slowly. Others passing would nod at Damiano, and I began to realize my companion was someone far more important than I'd thought. Yet he made no effort to talk to any of them, and they respected his privacy. We didn't speak either. I just wanted to spend time with him and absorb his presence.

"We're here."

One of Jocelyn's footmen helped me out of the gondola. I turned to thank Damiano for escorting me back to the *palazzo*. He grinned.

"I'll see you tonight, I'm sure."

"Of course." I nodded and entered the foyer.

I handed my coat, hat, and gloves to the waiting footman. Richard came down the stairs just as I turned.

"There you are. Jocelyn said you went out exploring the city. I should've known you wouldn't let a late night keep you from seeing Venice." Richard slapped my shoulder and gestured down the hallway. "I was just going to join my cousin and his beautiful wife for drinks before supper."

"I wish to go and change, but I'll be back down as soon as I can."

"I'll let them know you're back."

Richard went toward the back of the *palazzo*, while I headed

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upstairs to my room. Percy stood inside, waiting for me with a clean set of dinner clothes. I changed quickly, hungry from my vigorous afternoon activity.

“Thank you, Percy,” I said as I started to leave my room.

“You’re welcome, my lord. I’ll make sure to have your mask and cloak downstairs when you’re ready to leave.”

I joined the others in the sitting room. There were several strangers there as well alerting me to the fact it was a large dinner party, not an intimate family one. I yanked on the bottom of my waistcoat before walking into the room like I deserved to be there, though I felt as out of place as a street urchin at the king’s palace.

“There you are, Lord Fishburne.” Jocelyn slid her hand into the crook of my arm and smiled up at me. “Did you enjoy your afternoon?”

I blushed slightly, and she laughed.

“I’m glad you had an interesting time. Will you be going out again tomorrow? Our city has much to offer young men like you.”

Tongue-tied, I simply nodded. What could I say to that statement? I knew she was talking about my preference for male companionship, but did anyone else realize what she implied?

“I’ll say. I had a smashing time last night. I met this wonderful lady, Clive. You must let me introduce you.”

Richard gave me just enough time to kiss Jocelyn’s cheek before dragging me off to where a petite blonde lady stood. She was younger than Richard’s usual choice for companionship. Also, I knew she couldn’t be a member of the *demi-monde* because Jocelyn wouldn’t tolerate such a woman as that in her home.

“Lady Rebecca Leighton, this is my very good friend, Lord Clive Fishburne.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Fishburne. The viscount has

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told me many stories of your adventures on the continent.”

I blinked at her words. What had Richard been telling her? There weren't many of Richard's escapades he could share with a gently reared woman.

“Really?” I bowed over her hand with a brief smile. “Yes, we've been traveling for a while now. Of course, in a fortnight or two, we'll be heading back to England. We've been away for too long, I think.”

“Yes. My mother and I will be returning soon as well. In fact, Viscount Freemont has offered the use of his yacht for our trip home.”

“His yacht?” I sent Richard a quick glance.

“Yes, Clive. My yacht.” Richard would have kicked me if he could have without Lady Rebecca seeing.

“Ah, yes. It's a very nice yacht and has plenty of room for you and your mother, my lady.” I smiled, deciding not to push the issue that it was my father's yacht Richard had so cavalierly offered up to the pretty lady.

“Thank you,” Richard mumbled as he offered his arm to Rebecca. “Let us go see how your mother is doing.”

Standing, I watched them walk away.

“It would seem Richard has met a woman he couldn't charm into his bed.”

I turned to see Thomas stroll up to me, drink in hand. He gestured to the departing back of his cousin.

“My aunt would be happy to see him with a perfectly proper lady like Lady Leighton. Makes me wonder if he's using her as a distraction. His mother will quiz Richard when you get home as to how many eligible young ladies he met while he was on his Grand Tour.”

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“I didn’t realize young men were supposed to meet marriageable young ladies while they traveled the continent. I thought it was to sow wild oats before they settled down with the right lady their parents picked for them.”

Thomas’s loud laughter brought the attention of most of the people in the room to us. Jocelyn frowned at her husband’s brash amusement.

“You’re right, Clive. Parents want their children to listen to them and do what they think is right.” Thomas waved his glass in Jocelyn’s direction, threatening to spill his whiskey. “That’s how I ended up with Jocelyn. Great girl, but not much in common with her, you know. Good thing she’s understanding about things.”

I cringed inside, not wanting Thomas to spill his entire personal life in front of people who didn’t care, who would spread the news around society, making Jocelyn a laughingstock. It was one thing to think you knew what was going on in a couple’s bedroom; it was another thing to have proof. I took the glass from Thomas and stepped closer to him.

“You might wish to be more cautious in your speech. Your wife might not be as understanding if you make her the subject of the gossipmongers in your circle.”

Thomas’s eyes widened at my whispered admonishment. I was an unassuming man, slender and pale, without any truly distinguishing features. My personality was such that I blended into the background more than stood out, yet I wasn’t going to let Thomas get away with embarrassing Jocelyn after she had gone out of her way to be nice to me.

“Stop drinking so much, or learn to watch what you say around your friends.”

I set the glass down on one of the sideboards before sauntering

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off to where Jocelyn stood. I took a glass of whiskey Richard poured and handed to me. Jocelyn took my arm, and I smiled down at her.

“Thank you,” she said under her breath.

“You’re welcome, *signora*.” I glanced around the room. “Where is Donatello tonight?”

“His wife is having a ball in honor of his daughter, so he must stay home.” Jocelyn’s smile was wistful. “I’m understanding of Thomas’s transgressions simply because he understands mine.”

I tilted my head and winked at her. “That might be true, but he doesn’t need to announce to everyone about your understanding. It is between the two of you, not any of the vicious biddies who will savage your reputation.”

“Will you escort me to dinner, Lord Fishburne?”

“Gladly, *Signora* Freemont.”

The rest of Jocelyn’s guests followed us into the dining room, where we took our seats. I found she had placed me to her right, the seat I assumed Donatello sat in when he was there. Dinner was served and we chatted, talking about places we’d both visited and would like to see some day. We included the people next to us and, for the first time, I enjoyed a dinner party. Maybe because at her table, I wasn’t the youngest son of the Earl of Wiltshire, I was one of Jocelyn’s interesting friends. It was liberating to know Jocelyn wouldn’t force women on me, certain she knew just the lady I wanted as a wife.

I thanked God Jocelyn knew I didn’t want a wife, and her knowledge freed me to be the person I always kept hidden inside. I laughed and charmed the woman to my right. I watched Richard flirt with Lady Rebecca under the watchful eye of her mother. I studied how Thomas kept his wine consumption low and entered a

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business discussion with one of the men closest to him. I wanted to ask Jocelyn if the lady next to Thomas was his mistress, but I wasn't sure whether Jocelyn would have invited her husband's lover to her party.

We finished eating and the ladies left for the parlor while the men hung out, smoking and drinking. I slipped from the room. Drink and cigars had never been vices of mine. I wandered down the hall toward some room without people in it. I wanted a moment of solitude, a result of spending many days alone while a child. I stopped a passing footman.

"Where is the library?"

The young man looked surprised, but he showed me the right door, and I entered the library.

"Would you tell me when everyone else is ready to leave?"

"Yes, *signore*."

"Thank you." I turned to face the room, finding a chair next to the fireplace and sitting in it.

I stared into the low-burning fire, not really seeing it. My mind skipped through the events of last night and this afternoon. Ever since I started having impure thoughts, they had always been about the footmen or stable boys I encountered during my daily life. I understood those fantasies were perverted and I tried to cast my longings in the right directions. Yet women left me cold and uninterested. They puzzled me in many ways, but I tried. The past two days showed me the truth of my soul.

Only with Damiano was I truly myself. I could stare at him without worrying about being beaten or killed for my lingering gaze. For what little time we had together, Damiano would be my tutor. Maybe through his tutelage, I would find the courage to search out other like-minded men when I returned to England.

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I snorted silently. Who was I kidding? I didn't have the strength to go out and find what I was looking for. I stood and waited for it to come to me. I was a passive participant in my own life. As I leaned forward, I braced my elbows on my knees and glared at the floor. Would there ever come a time when I took control of my own life and demanded the right to chose for myself? While society would never accept my bed companions, I would force them to accept the fact I didn't want a wife. Luckily, being the youngest son, I wasn't expected to carry on the family name.

A soft knock brought me to my feet.

"Come in."

The same footman I had asked to get me when the others were ready looked around the edge of the door. "The *signore* and *signora* are ready to depart, my lord."

"Thank you."

I followed him back to the foyer where the other members of the party waited. I slipped on my domino and cloak, standing to one side while the others sorted themselves out as to who rode with whom. Jocelyn glanced at me and gestured for me to join her.

"You can be my escort until Donatello gets free of his family." She leaned closer and whispered, "Or until you see someone more to your liking."

I blushed, but bowed. "I'm sure no one can hold a candle to you, *signora*."

She laughed. "With your charm, it is certainly my sex's loss that your attention turns elsewhere."

"If I were so inclined, I would try to steal you away from Donatello," I teased her.

"Donatello should be grateful you aren't because I just might

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let you steal me.”

We swept from the *palazzo* to gondolas and carriages. Not everyone chose to use the canals, though the streets were crowded with Carnival revelers. As we settled into our gondolas, I studied the crowds walking along the streets. They laughed and joked, shouting out greetings to other groups. They paid no heed to the slight chill and dampness in the air. I longed to be out among them, to feel their vitality and absorb the joy of living they exuded.

“We have several balls to visit tonight. Donatello will probably join us at the third one. His wife won’t expect him to stay all night at their ball. When he arrives, you’re released from your escort duty and may leave our party.” Jocelyn rested her cheek on my shoulder. “Damiano is quite a marvelous man, isn’t he?”

Did I really want to discuss my lover with her? I had no way of knowing whether she knew Damiano and I shared our bodies or not. I cleared my throat and glanced around, noticing that the others in our gondola paid no attention to us. They were drinking and talking amongst themselves.

“Yes, he is.” No point in lying since Jocelyn wouldn’t betray me.

She sighed and giggled. “He’s another man I’d gladly let steal me away if he were so inclined. We have been friends for years and it pleases me to see him so infatuated with someone. He’s very much a solitary man, even amongst his friends.”

I thought about her statement and nodded slowly. “He does seem rather contained. Maybe it is because of the responsibility his status in society places on him.”

“It could be, though I’ve often thought he would be that way whether he was a king or a pauper. It’s just his nature to be aloof.”

Some people were like that. Contained within themselves,

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needing neither approval nor acceptance to live their lives. I'd often admired them, wishing I could be more like them.

Our conversation halted as we arrived at the first ball of the night. I helped Jocelyn out of the gondola and we joined the crush of people making their way up the stairs to the *palazzo*. She greeted friends and acquaintances, making sure to introduce me to all of them. I doubted I'd remember any of them. My eyes scanned the masks, some elaborate and some plain like mine, searching for the familiar one, yet nothing caught my gaze.

Damiano might have been late, or since there were so many people milling about, it would be easy to miss him. I remained with Jocelyn, dancing and chatting with her and the group of admirers gathered around her like bees to a beautiful flower. She flirted and teased, but never moved far from me. Without Donatello there, I became her protector. I was happy to provide her an arm to cling to and a person she could trust. We had no expectations of anything except friendship.

It wasn't long before we left the first ball and moved on to the second one. There were just as many people at it, and I knew the hostess would be thrilled. As for me, my heart grew heavy as Damiano failed to appear. My disappointment must have shown on my face because Jocelyn patted my hand.

"Don't worry. He'll show up at one of these things. He has just as many obligations as I do, and he does take them very seriously." She shrugged and smiled tightly at a man who bowed in her direction. "There are times when I wish I could throw all of this to the gutter and live as a milkmaid somewhere in the country."

I tried to picture the elegant Jocelyn dressed as a milkmaid, crouched next to a cow and burst out laughing. She slapped me with her fan as I tried to catch my breath.

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“It was a thought. I never said I’d actually do that.” Jocelyn huffed.

“I’m sure you’d be a wonderful milkmaid and all the farmers would be clamoring for your hand. You would make some sturdy country boy a good wife.” I grinned down at her, and she rolled her eyes.

“Oh, stop teasing. We both know I’d be terrible at country life. I need my ostentatious *palazzo* and regrettably expensive wardrobe to be happy.” Jocelyn waved a hand in a rather vague circle, encompassing the ballroom. “Sometimes I get bored with all of this.”

“Ah, then maybe I can do something to liven up your obligations, *mi amore*.”

We swung around, and I stepped aside as Donatello bowed over Jocelyn’s hand. No longer needed, I wandered around the edges of the dance floor, trying not to make eye contact because I didn’t want to stop and talk to anyone. Finally, I reached the doors leading out onto the verandah. The cool night air drew me out into the dark, away from the crush of people, scents, and noise.

I leaned my hip against the railing and stared down into the black water of the canal. The soft golden glow of the lanterns reflected like stars in the liquid, tempting me to make a wish on one of them, even though they weren’t truly stars and I didn’t believe in wishes.

“There you are. I feared I’d have to chase you around the city as you and Jocelyn gadded about to all the balls.”

Whirling around, I spotted Damiano standing a few feet outside the doors, his mask in his hand. Without a pause, he took my hand and dragged me into the shadows. I tore my domino off and let it drop to the marble beneath my feet before wrapping my arms

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around his shoulders. He crushed me to his chest and took my mouth with breathless determination.

All the noise around us disappeared as I opened to him, allowing his tongue entrance. We dueled and stroked, tempting each other with memories of what we'd done earlier that day. He slipped one of his hands down to squeeze my backside, and I gasped, arching into his solid body, wanting more.

Only when my lungs burned for air did we break apart. My chest heaved and I pressed my fingers to my lips before dropping them and staring at Damiano.

“Will you come with me? I want to show you my city at night.”

“Isn't it dangerous?” I asked, while crouching to snatch my domino off the verandah.

He shrugged, indifferent to the peril lurking in alleys and under bridges of the city, especially for a man who wore his wealth like an invisible mantel around his shoulders and presented a target for the criminals.

“My servant will be following us.”

“I'd love to go with you then.”

Saying no never entered my mind. It didn't matter if Damiano led me into the most dangerous criminal-infested part of Venice, I would go anywhere he wanted. I tugged my domino back on, and he donned his mask again. We wove our way through the mob of society's highest members. I spotted Jocelyn and gestured to Damiano walking in front of me. Smiling, she nodded and shooed me after him.

I stopped a few feet away as Damiano paused to say good-bye to our hostess. She rested her hand on his arm and a wave of jealousy swelled in me. I turned to the side slightly, uneasy with the intensity of my emotions. Our relationship was a simple

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dalliance for both of us. I doubted Damiano really wanted me as anything more than a body to warm his bed. Maybe he was bored and seducing a virgin kept him entertained for a time.

A light touch at my elbow brought me around and I looked up to see Damiano at my side. I couldn't tell if he smiled or not, but he gently tugged on my arm to get me moving. He seemed impatient and didn't stop to chat with any of the people who acknowledged him. Part of me preened at his undivided attention, even though I knew I shouldn't. Nothing we did was accepted by society and if we were found out, we could both die, killed for our desires.

Yet I willingly joined Damiano out on the streets of Venice, merging with the flow of the crowd. He kept his hand at the small of my back under my cloak, directing me without forcing. He took a bottle offered him and drank from it, handing it to me after he finished. I wiped the mouth of the bottle with my sleeve before drinking from it. A small swallow and I handed it to the person beside me.

We continued on through the streets, over the bridges, and into squares. We drank and joked with the others. We danced in the shadows while small traveling bands played on different corners. I laughed and flirted with Damiano, free of all society's restraints and worries. As we passed by an alley, he grabbed my arm and dragged me down the alleyway to where the shadows covered the space, hiding our actions.

I gasped as he slammed me into the brick wall. He stripped our masks off and tossed them to the ground. I wound my arms around his shoulders and opened to him. He swept his tongue into my mouth while he reached between us to fumble with my pants.

"Oh, my." I groaned as he cupped my prick with his hot hand.

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He chuckled and kissed along my jaw down to my neck where he scraped his teeth over my skin. With one hard stroke, I was ready to spill.

“Damiano,” I whispered and arched, pushing my rod through his fingers.

“Spend, Clive. Show me how much you like my hand on your flesh,” he ordered, pressing his lips to my ear.

Gripping his shoulders, I rocked against him and my pleasure increased until I couldn’t hold back any longer. I threw my head back and banged it against the wall hard enough to see sparks before my eyes, or it could have been the force of my climax blurring my vision. My hips jerked and I trembled. Damiano continued to pump my cock, drawing all the seed he could from me.

When I lost all strength in my limbs, Damiano removed his hand from my pants and whirled me around. I pressed my cheek to the rough wall in front of me and tilted my backside toward him. He yanked down my pants to my knees and spread my legs as far as the fabric would let them. I moaned as he shoved his seed-covered fingers deep into me. The burn of his invasion shot through me and lifted me onto the tips of my toes.

He eased out a little, but didn’t leave all together. Stretching my opening, he didn’t give me a chance to deny him. Not that I would have because he had somehow become the most important person in my life at that moment.

“No,” I protested as he took his fingers away.

“Don’t worry, love.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw him spit in his hand to coat his own prick. After turning back, I rested my forehead on my arms and bit my lip as Damiano sank deep into me. He filled me

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until I didn't think any more of his rod would fit, but with one last shove, he was all the way in. His head dropped to my shoulder and he started to move, hard and fast. I lifted my head and braced my hands on the wall, pushing back with each thrust.

He grunted and his hands on my hips dug in, adding another hint of pain to our coupling. I stiffened as voices drifted down the alley. I'd forgotten about the revelers drinking and celebrating Carnival. What if someone came down and saw us? We could be arrested for what we were doing, yet the chance of that happening excited me even more. My prick grew hard again and I shouted as Damiano hit something inside me.

“Hmmm... you like that, huh?”

I couldn't say anything, so just nodded. Damiano stroked harder and faster, slamming into me with each thrust. Our grunts and groans filled the air, overshadowing the noises coming from the streets.

“Please, I need...” I begged.

Damiano nailed that secret spot again and again, driving me closer and closer to my second climax. His rhythm faltered and stuttered. One more deep thrust in and he flooded my arse with hot seed. The rush of liquid pushed me over the edge into my second climax of the night. My arms collapsed and I barely managed not to bump my face into the brick wall. Damiano allowed me to prop him up for a few minutes.

I murmured in protest as Damiano's softened penis slid from my arse. The ripping of fabric caught my attention and I shot a look over my shoulder. Damiano had torn a strip of his cloak off and he wiped both of us clean. He helped me dress and straightened his own clothes.

He picked up our masks and handed mine to me. “Let's go.

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There's more to see and do before the night is over.”

I accepted his offer and headed back to the street. If Damiano had wanted to go to hell, I would gladly have gone with him.

* * *

The next night, I searched through the crowds at the balls, but Damiano didn't appear and he didn't show the night after that. I only had a few more days left in Venice, yet I had no interest in anything else except seeing Damiano again. Finally, I went to Jocelyn.

She smiled as I entered her private parlor. “Clive, it's wonderful to see you, my dear. Would you like some tea?”

I nodded and let her pour me a cup. I didn't take the milk or sugar she offered. Settling in the chair across from her, I fingered the handle of my cup, trying to figure out how to broach the subject.

“Is there something you wish to ask me, Clive?” She folded her hands over her lap and eyed me. “You may ask me anything.”

“Do you know where Damiano is?”

“Ah. I have noticed he hasn't been around the past two days. He might have been called back to his country estate. It happens sometimes with men like Damiano. He likes to keep his fingers in all the pots he has money invested in.” Jocelyn studied me. “I could send a note around to his *palazzo* and find out for you.”

I stared down into the dark amber tea and thought. Did I want to know if he'd left or if he'd lost interest in me? I wasn't sure my ego or heart could take the knowledge that he didn't care about me. How had I fallen in love with the man when I barely knew him? Was it the emotions of my first lover? If I didn't see him anymore,

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would it fade away until all I remembered was the pleasure of our time together?

Shaking my head, I said, “No. It’s fine. I only have a few more days here before I must return to England. I don’t want to bother him if he’s busy with other things.”

Jocelyn stood and held out her hand to me. “Come. I feel the need to go shopping, and you’re going to escort me.”

I set my cup down and pushed to my feet. Bowing over her hand, I smiled. “I’ll be glad to be the companion of such a beautiful lady.”

We left to go shopping, and over the next few days I discovered how much she had become my friend. Jocelyn, Donatello, and their friends kept me busy, so I wouldn’t fret about why Damiano had disappeared.

My hope still grew that he would come to see me before I left, but even on the day the yacht left the docks, Damiano never appeared. Richard didn’t notice my depression, being captivated by Lady Rebecca, and I stayed away from their courtship, not having the heart to darken their joy.

As I watched Venice shrink on the horizon, I left the city that welcomed me in a way no other place had.

I whispered, “Good-bye,” to the man who had stolen my heart.

CHAPTER 5

“Master Clive.”

I looked up from my book as Thompson, my father’s butler, spoke.

“Yes, Thompson?”

“There is a gentleman here to see you.”

Frowning, I tried to think of any of my friends still in the country. Most of them had gone to Town for the season.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite, sir. He asked for you by name. He’s a foreigner. His name is *Signore* Belsini. I took the liberty of putting him in the Blue Room.”

That name sounded Italian to me. Could my Carnival lover have found me? I fought back my excitement.

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“I’ll go see what he wants.” I set aside my book and stood, practically quivering with the need to race to the Blue Room and see who waited for me. “Bring some tea.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Thompson bowed and left while I strolled down the hall to the front parlor we all called the Blue Room because of my mother’s unfortunate love of blue.

After opening the door and stepping in, my gaze went to the man standing in front of the fireplace, studying the rather appalling portrait of my mother dressed in several shades of blue. It wasn’t her best color. Disappointment shot through me. My visitor was too old, too short, and too plump to be Damiano. My inner voice snorted in disgust at me. It had been a few marvelous days out of time for us. While I fell in love, Damiano had played, never promising anything more than to bring me to the heights of ecstasy every time.

I cleared my throat as I walked forward, my hand outstretched. “*Signore* Belsini, I’m Lord Clive Fishburne.”

I spoke in Italian, knowing Belsini would be more comfortable speaking his own language.

“My lord, it’s an honor to meet you. Your Italian is flawless. I can see why I’ve been sent here.”

Belsini took my hand and bowed slightly. I gestured to some chairs.

“Please, sit. My butler will be bringing us some tea soon. Unless you wish for something stronger.”

The Italian paled and shook his head. “No. I’m a poor traveler and my stomach still hasn’t settled from my journey.”

We took our chairs and made small talk while Thompson brought the tea and served us. I waited until Thompson left before

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asking, "Why are you here, *signore*?"

"My employer is looking for a tutor for his young nephews. Twins, age seven."

"A tutor? Me?" I started to laugh. The action brought on my lingering cough.

Belsini eyed me with concern. "Are you all right?"

I waved away his worry. "I'm fine. When I returned from your marvelous country, I was struck ill. I'm fully recovered except for this annoying cough. It's the reason you found me here instead of London."

"I'm glad to hear you're recovered. Count Lorenzo di Salvatore would like to hire you as the masters' tutor."

I frowned. "I don't remember meeting Count di Salvatore while I was in Italy."

Belsini shook his head. "His lordship was only in Venice a week or so before he was called home to attend to his brother's estate. His brother and his brother's wife died in a carriage accident, leaving his nephews orphaned."

"How sad," I commiserated, still not sure what it had to do with me.

"Tragic." Belsini fell silent for a moment. "Count di Salvatore spotted you at one of his acquaintances' parties. He'd been searching for a tutor for the boys for a while and decided on finding an Englishman to do it. He inquired about your background and had been about to speak to you about it when the accident happened. Unfortunately, by the time he dealt with the estate and remembered, you had already left for England."

"I left Venice the day after Carnival ended."

I'd returned home with a broken heart, listless and uninterested in anything around me. I believed my lethargy led to my illness.

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“Yes. It took his lordship several months to find you. As soon as he had the information, he sent me to you with this proposition. I also carry the names of several men in London who would give you references for my lord.” He held out a sheet of paper he’d pulled from inside his jacket.

After setting aside my tea, I took the paper and read the names. All were powerful men who ran in my father’s circle, but as his third son, I had nothing more than a nodding acquaintance with any of them.

“I’ve been reassured that, if you choose, we will be welcomed by each of those men to discuss the count.”

“How much time do I have to decide?”

Even as I asked, I knew what my choice would be. I might have been born in England, but I belonged in Italy.

“Does the count live in Venice?”

“His lordship’s estates are two days’ carriage ride from Venice, but he does own a few *palazzos* there.” Belsini’s face almost glowed with pride when he talked about Salvatore’s property.

Being in Venice could offer me a chance to search for Damiano, even though in my heart, I realized I’d never see him again.

“*Signore* Belsini, I need to hear from the men on this list first. I assume the count didn’t travel with you.”

“Oh no, my lord. He didn’t wish to leave the children alone. They’ve become very attached to him. He also deemed them too young to travel so far.”

Nodding, I stood and went to pull the bell rope, summoning Thompson.

“Please, accept my hospitality tonight. I’ll pack and we will leave for London tomorrow morning. I’ll give you my answer by

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tomorrow night.”

Belsini agreed and we spent the rest of the time talking about Italy and the places I'd visited on my travels there. Dinner was far more pleasant than I'd had in months. My valet packed my clothes, and I went to bed, dreaming of the warm embrace of my masked lover.

* * *

I stood on the bow of the count's yacht a week later, waving good-bye to my family. My mother cried when I told her I was leaving to be a tutor in Italy. My father shook his head and told me I knew the way home when I got tired of gallivanting around the continent. He had no idea Italy was my home and had been since my time spent there. *Signore* Belsini stood with me for a while, but once we were truly underway, he went below to his cabin. He really was a terrible traveler. The poor man was seasick most of the time we sailed. I hardly saw him out of his room during the two months it took to get to Venice.

When the yacht docked in Venice, it felt like I'd come home after a long journey. Foolish thoughts, I know, but it was my truth. I waited on deck for *Signore* Belsini to join me. I helped the poor man off the boat to where a smaller gondola waited for us. After settling in and *Signore* Belsini giving the driver the correct address, we traveled down the canals that were the roads and streets of Venice.

“What is Count di Salvatore like?” The question had danced on my tongue most of the time since I'd agreed to tutor the count's nephews.

Belsini frowned, still slightly green. Obviously, water didn't

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agree with him. “I’m not sure what you mean by that question. Didn’t you hear what those men said?”

“They talked about how much they respected him as a businessman. None of them told me what kind of man he is to work for. I want to know what I can expect from him.”

Oh, I figured any man who would send someone all the way to England for a tutor must care deeply for his nephews, but I wanted to know how stern a taskmaster he would be. Never having been a tutor before, I was sure my methods wouldn’t be the proper kind. I was going to teach the boys like my tutor taught me and, hopefully, give the young masters a love for learning that would never die.

“The count is a good man. As long as you respect him, he’ll treat you fairly. He expects the best out of everyone, but if you try and fail, he won’t punish you. Those two boys are his entire world now. Nothing must harm them in any way.”

“I understand.”

And I did. Making the boys happy was my biggest goal. If they were happy, the count would be.

Excitement swelled in me as we passed under bridges and glided by *palazzos*. Images from my time spent dancing and drinking during Carnival assailed me. I remembered what it was like to duck into shadows and be kissed senseless by Damiano. At night, I would shamelessly take myself in hand and pleasure myself until I spent while reliving those marvelous times.

“Here we are.” Belsini climbed out of the gondola on the small platform.

A man stood nearby, dressed in immaculate black and white livery. There was something familiar about the set of his chin and the lift of his eyebrows, yet my brain wouldn’t let me realize how I might have known him. He bowed to Belsini.

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“*Signore* Belsini, it is good to have you back with us. How was your journey?”

“Terrible,” Belsini muttered, waving to him to pay the gondola driver. “Pay the man and let’s get inside. I could really use a glass of wine by now.”

“Certainly, *signore*. I see your trip was fruitful at least.” The man bowed to me. “I am Sebastian, the count’s major d’omo. If you need anything at all, come to me and I’ll get it for you.”

“Thank you, Sebastian. I’m Lord Clive Fishburne, and I look forward to working with you.”

Sebastian dipped his head in agreement before leading the way into the *palazzo*. It wasn’t as grand as some of the *palazzos* I’d been in with Damiano, but it had a simple elegance I liked. I never cared for over the top ostentatious displays. It was obvious the count had money, but, thank God, he had the good taste not to flaunt it. Murals covered the walls as we walked down the hallway to a parlor.

“Please, sit and rest. I’ll make sure one of the maids brings you tea, Lord Clive, and you know where the wine is, *Signore* Belsini.” Sebastian gestured to some chairs arranged in front of a fireplace. “I’ll inform the count you are here.”

Belsini scurried over to the side bar where several decanters sat. I took a seat while the man poured himself a rather large glass of wine. I smiled as he sighed.

“There’s nothing like a good Italian wine to wipe away the cobwebs of travel.” He sat next to me and crossed his legs, a happy look on his face for the first time since I met him.

“I’m sure Italians feel about wine the same way the English feel about tea.” I rested my head back on the chair, fatigue hitting me.

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Now that I was back in Venice, my nerves calmed down. Finally, I was back and, even though the possibility of me seeing Damiano again was slim, I couldn't help but hope. He was my first lover. The one who had taught me that, while the rest of the world might condemn me, I shouldn't be ashamed for loving who I loved.

A maid brought tea and scones for me. The tea was brewed to my taste, which pleased me. The scones were okay, but they had never been my favorite anyway. A half-hour had gone by before Sebastian returned.

“Count di Salvatore will see you now, my lord.”

I set my teacup down and stood, wiping my hands on my trousers. Nerves hit me all of a sudden and the disparaging voice in my head asked what I thought I was doing. I wasn't a teacher or a scholar. I was the third son of an earl. That got me nothing but a useless title and not much else. I took a deep breath. The count sent Belsini all the way to England to find me. He must have seen something in me that told him I would be good for his nephews.

I followed Sebastian down another hallway and up a flight of stairs toward the back of the *palazzo*. We came to a large set of oak doors with inlaid mother-of-pearl panels. My hands itched to touch them, to stroke my fingers over the lustrous squares. They reminded me of Damiano's mask when the moonlight struck it. Sebastian knocked, and a deep voice bid us to enter.

The major d'omo bowed and gestured for me to go on in alone. As I walked past him, he murmured, “It's good to see you again, my lord.”

I stiffened, but before I could ask him what he meant by that, he shut the door behind me. I looked toward the large desk dominating the room. The man sitting there didn't look up for a

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moment. I controlled the urge to fidget by glancing around the room.

Very masculine was the first thought that hit me. Dark wood graced the walls, interspersed with beautifully painted murals depicting scenes from history. There was one I wanted to look at closer. A group of men wearing Roman armor stood arm-in-arm, in some way looking more like lovers than soldiers. I frowned, wondering if it was a painting based on the Sacred Band of Thebes.

“It’s good to see you again, Clive. I’d worried that I’d lost you.”

My head jerked around and my mouth dropped open as I watched Damiano stroll from behind the desk and approach me.

“Damiano?” I barely managed to get out before he swept me into his arms and kissed me.

Oh God, yes! My heart pounded as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and pressed closer to him. His lips on mine were what I’d longed for since he’d disappeared from Carnival. He licked at the seam of my mouth, begging entrance. There wasn’t any way I could deny him. I opened like a flower to the morning dew, and he invaded, a conquering army determined to overwhelm me.

My knees threatened to buckle under his assault. All I could think about was finding someplace he could lie with me. Or maybe take me up against the wall, like one of our encounters during the best week of my life. I wound my leg around his thigh, rocking our hips together. A whimper tore from me as my hard length rubbed against his.

He broke away just as my head started to swirl from lack of oxygen. Damiano rested his forehead on mine and panted, trying to

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calm us both down, though I didn't want that. I wanted him wild for me, with no thought except how soon he could take me.

Stepping back, he grabbed my hand and dragged me over to the chair in front of the fireplace. He sat before pulling me onto his lap. I straddled his thighs, staring at him.

Tall, with dark hair streaked with silver, Damiano demanded respect with his very demeanor. His rough-hewn face held lines of worry and pain, causing me to stroke my thumb over one, erasing it. Dark brown eyes met mine, and if I had any doubt how he felt about me, all his love shone in them.

I cradled his face in my hands and bent, brushing a kiss over his lips. "Was your brother's death the reason you disappeared without a word? Was the *palazzo* you took me to yours as well?"

"Yes, that *palazzo* is the one I used to stay in, especially when my brother would bring his family to town. I won't be staying there anymore. I make this my home now, for the boys' sake." Sadness crept into his gaze and he nodded. "I'd gotten word while I dressed to meet you. I'd planned on telling the entire truth to you that night, but I couldn't allow those boys to be left alone, not even if it was at the expense of my heart."

I nodded. "I understand now. I won't lie and tell you I wasn't hurt when you didn't show up for our rendezvous. How it broke me when I realized I knew nothing more about you than your name. I didn't even know what you really looked like. Jocelyn offered to send a note to your *palazzo* for me, but I didn't want to find out that I was just a distraction to you."

He gathered me close, cupping the back of my head and urging me to rest it on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, *mi amore*. I wouldn't have hurt you for the world, but I didn't have any choice. I forgot everything except being with my nephews and trying to ease their

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loss. It wasn't until a few days later that I sent a message to you, but you'd already left for England."

"I had to leave," I murmured, placing my hand over his heart. Its steady beat eased me in a way I'd never felt before. "You wouldn't be the man I love if you didn't do all you could to protect your family. I don't blame you."

"Thank you. When I was able to return to Venice, Jocelyn told me where you lived, and I set the wheels in motion to hire you as my nephews' tutor. When the time came, I sent Belsini to find you." He kissed my temple. "Belsini wrote and told me you had been ill. Are you better now?"

"Oh, yes." I straightened, so he could look at me. "I only had a lingering cough when Belsini first met me. I think it'll go away after being here for a while. It's much warmer here than it is in England. I also think my heart was missing you."

"Ah, my dear one, I couldn't sleep without dreaming of you. I wanted to hear your voice and feel your touch. Not just to sink into your body like I long to do now, but to spend time with you, talking and learning."

I hesitated as a thought gave me pause. "Did you really want me as your nephews' tutor? Or was that just a ruse to get me here?"

Damiano shook his head. "No, I do want you to teach my nephews, but not as their tutor. I can hire someone else for that."

"But I want to do it. I think I'd be good at it, plus it'll give me a reason to live with you without anyone beginning to suspect us."

He looked like he wanted to protest that. I placed my finger on his lips.

"You might not care what people think about you and how they react to our relationship. You have to think about your nephews.

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They don't deserve to be ostracized because of their uncle's living arrangements. You know how people talk about the lord's discretions with the governess or maid. Imagine what rumors would fly if they knew you were bedding your nephews' tutor."

Closing his eyes, Damiano considered my explanation. Appealing to the love he held for his nephews seemed the best way to convince him not to flaunt our love in front of everyone. I didn't need him to acknowledge me in public as his lover. I understood how dangerous—even in the more open-minded society of Venice—two men loving each other could be. As long as I shared his bed each night and he treated me like an equal when we were alone, I would be happy.

"It doesn't seem fair to you," he murmured.

I chuckled and pecked him on the cheek. "I don't care. I'd rather spend time here like this with you than grace your arm at any ball. While you're out charming your peers, I'll teach your nephews to grow up to be the kind of men you can be proud of."

He embraced me tightly, nuzzling my neck. "I knew there was a reason I fell in love with you. So generous, even if it means I have to hide you in the shadows."

"But we can have so much fun in the shadows," I whispered in his ear, rolling my hips and drawing a groan from him.

"So we can. I think you need to rest after such a tiring journey." Damiano stood, set me on my feet, and went to the door. "Sebastian, show Lord Fishburne to his room."

"Yes, sir." Sebastian bowed and motioned for me to follow him. "I'm sure his lordship will give you a more in-depth tour tomorrow, but I'll let you know that you'll be on the second floor next to the count's room. The young masters' rooms are just a few doors down from you. Count di Salvatore doesn't ascribe to the

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idea that the children should be hidden away.”

“Good because neither do I. How else are they supposed to learn anything if we hide them away from the world?” I shook my head. “I never understood that, but I guess most people don’t like children.”

“True enough, my lord.” Sebastian stopped outside one of the doors. “This is your room.”

He opened the door, and I entered, my mouth dropping open again. It was far more elaborate than my room at home. Decorated in dark deep blues and reds with dark wood paneling on the walls, this was a room I could spend time in, though I didn’t plan to do much sleeping in it.

“Your bags have been brought up. Did you bring a valet or should I find one for you?”

I glanced at Sebastian. “I left my old valet at home. He wasn’t interested in traveling. If you could find one for me, I would appreciate it. You know what I’m looking for.”

The major d’omo nodded. “Of course. Also, this door connects you to the count’s bedroom.”

Somehow I managed not to blush when he opened the hidden door to show me. I simply nodded. It was foolish to get upset over Sebastian knowing about Damiano and me. I suddenly remembered who Sebastian was. He was the one who followed Damiano and me around the city our one night during Carnival. He made sure no one discovered us or spied us doing inappropriate things while in public. Obviously, he was the one person Damiano trusted with all his secrets, so I would do the same. He would find me the right person to be my valet.

“Thank you, Sebastian. I think I’m going to lie down until dinner.”

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“Certainly, sir.”

With a slight smile, Sebastian bowed as he slipped from the room. I waited until the door closed before I slipped out of my jacket and tossed it over one of the chairs. I unbuttoned my waistcoat and did the same with it. After stripping out of my shirt, I stood, wondering if Damiano meant what I thought he meant or if I was just having a moment of wishful dreaming.

I jumped when the connecting door opened. Damiano stood there, wearing a robe, and smiling at me.

“Were you wondering if I really wanted you to go take a nap?”

Shrugging, I strolled over to him. “The thought crossed my mind.”

Damiano reached and snagged me around the waist, jerking me tight against him. I wound my arms around his neck as he dragged me into his room, shutting the door behind him. He kissed me and somehow we managed to end up on the bed. At some point, I tugged his robe off him, revealing a sculpted chest and flat stomach. No sign of excess on my lord.

I urged him to roll over onto his back, letting me look my fill. He folded his hands behind his head and grinned.

“Do you like what you see, my love?”

Oh God, did I. Everything about him was perfect, even the little scar he bore on the curve of his hip. I trailed my tongue over the mark and down to where his cock jutted out from his groin. Being able to take him in my mouth and actually see him thrilled me in new ways. There still was an illicit feel to it, mostly because if we were discovered, we could very well hang for the offense.

As I swallowed him, he arched and thrust deep into my mouth. I relaxed, taking him in until the crown of his shaft hit the back of my throat. I moaned at the salty taste of his flesh dancing on my

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tongue.

“I missed your mouth, my sweet. Almost as much as I missed your arse.”

He laughed at the way my body shuddered at his words. I wanted to be filled by him so badly, and he knew it. He buried his fingers in my hair and pulled me off him. I whined at the loss of his cock.

“Hush now.” Damiano nodded toward the stand next to the bed. “In the drawer is a little bottle of oil. Get it for me and you can go back to what you were doing.”

I crawled across the bed, ignoring how wanton I looked. All I could think about was taking him into me and feeling him flood my inner passage with his seed. Scrambling around the drawer, I crowed in triumph when my hand grabbed hold of the bottle. I yanked it out and handed it to him, intent on getting my prize.

“Wait a moment.” He took hold of my hips and rearranged me, so my buttocks stuck right out in his face and his cock proudly stood in mine.

I froze, not sure what he was going to do. He slapped my butt, and I jumped.

“You may suck me while I get you ready for me.”

A whimper sounded low in my throat. I leaned forward and slurped him in, trying to take him down as far as I could, but it had been a while. I gagged and eased back, not wanting to ruin everything. As I rocked back, I groaned because Damiano’s finger pushed into me. Oil trickled down my crease to help ease his way.

Within minutes, I moved between his rod and his finger, letting each shove in as far as it could go. My body tightened and my release built at the base of my spine. I protested when Damiano removed his fingers from my arse.

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“Get on your back, love.”

I eagerly did as he told me. On my back with my legs spread wide, I was sure I looked like a whore, but I didn't care. I needed him inside me to dispel the emptiness I'd felt since I'd left Venice all those months ago. My loneliness would slowly disappear the more time I spent with Damiano. My illness had built upon my heartache, yet I knew now that Damiano didn't leave me because he was bored. He left to take care of others he loved, which made him the man I loved.

He lifted my legs over his arms and breached my backside with one long, slow stroke. I braced my hands against the headboard as I took each thrust. We moved together like we'd never been apart. This encounter wasn't going to be slow and gentle.

The smell of sweat and sex filled the air along with the sounds of our bodies coming together as he slammed into me.

“Oh, Damiano, please,” I whimpered.

“Yes, love. Spill for me.”

With a grunt, I coated my stomach with my own seed. One more thrust and Damiano's hot liquid poured into me. The tremors inside me encouraged more of Damiano's essence to fill me. When my climax left me, I twined my arms around my lover's shoulders and encouraged him to lie on top of me.

“I don't want to crush you,” he murmured.

“Don't worry. You won't ever hurt me.”

“But I did, and I didn't mean to do that. I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you. I knew I had to have you, no matter what. Being your first lover meant more to me than anything else.” He nuzzled my chin and brushed a kiss over my jaw.

“I think I fell in love with you that first moment as well. I'd never known anyone like you. Maybe we shouldn't care for each

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other like we do, but I believe in fate, and we were meant to meet at that ball.” I smoothed my hand over his back.

“Carnival will always be my favorite celebration of the year,” Damiano teased.

“Mine as well,” I agreed. “We’ll find a way to make this work without ruining your reputation or the boys’. I’m not concerned about me. I’m a younger son, not important in society.”

“But you’re important to me, and I don’t want you hurt in any way.” He pushed up and stared down at me.

I smiled up at him. “Nothing can hurt me as long as you continue to love me.”

He leaned back down and kissed me, full of promise and caring. We embraced, and he rolled, sliding out of me with a sigh. I rested my head on his shoulder and pressed against his side. His warm hand ran up and down my back, lulling me into a drowsy state of mind.

“Let’s sleep, love.” Damiano kissed my hair and settled under the blankets, wrapping me in his arms.

“Love you,” I murmured as I drifted off into the most peaceful slumber I’d experienced since leaving Venice.

T. A. CHASE

T. A. Chase lives a life without boundaries. Being fascinated by life and how different we all are, she writes about the things that make us unique. She finds beauty in all kinds of love and enjoys sharing those insights. She lives in the Midwest with his partner of fourteen years. When she isn't writing, she's watching movies, reading and living life to the fullest.

* * *

**Don't miss *Bastet*
by T. A. Chase,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Kellan Largent is a grad student at Harvard. His thesis is on ancient Egyptian religious cults. While immersed in his research, he comes across an obscure reference to the Earth Warrior cult. Little does he know that one sentence in a dusty, tattered book will engulf him in a battle between good and evil. A battle that could be the end of the world as he knows it.

The stray cat wandering the streets around Kellan's house is more than an abandoned feline. Bastet has roamed the earth from the days when Egypt was young. He's watched the pharaohs rise and fall, new gods come and go. His purpose, however, has remained the same—protect the earth at all costs and keep the secrets of the

Earth Warriors from regular mortals. He's sent to keep Kellan Largent from finding out the truth about the cult, but also to keep the unsuspecting college student alive.

One man will do anything for the spell that created the Warriors. He wants immortality, and killing Kellan for the secret is just the beginning of the trouble he'll cause to get what he wants.

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