

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Even the princess was misled. Her carriage returned the next morning with a delivery Alessandro was waiting for.

Golone emerged from the kitchen eating something. "So, Maestro, what will you be this year?"

"It isn't for me."

"Hey, I don't want to play the doctor again."

"I thought it *perfetto*, *Medico de la Peste*. You were almost suitably nose-y."

"Very funny," Golone did appreciate.

"*Così*. This year *Pierrot*, the loyal servant."

Cook grabbed the cake out of Golone's mouth.

"I just meant to enjoy your delicious *panettone*."

"If only. With any luck you'll have your throat slit."

Lidia pulled on Cook's arm and crossed herself. Alessandro pleaded, too, with a different tactic: "My favorite cook, don't you forgive?" He lifted her hand to inhale its labors.

"For you, signor," Cook weakly pushed him away, "almost anything."

"Ah." Alessandro noticed Donatella with her back to a wall, beckoning her with the bulging package.

"What is it?"

He moved towards the stairs with a finger to his lips, Despina suddenly on the second floor landing as she might have been all along. "Are you well, *signorina*?"

"Of course. And you, signor?"

"It's time for *Carnevale*."

"As you know," Despina came down a step or two as he went up, "I think it's better to stay away."

"*Impossibile*."

Her niece passed her disapproval, too, Alessandro's encouragement relieving both women of their unhappy relationship.

"Don't worry," Golone said to Despina, "unlike me, he's the best of scoundrels."

Her reply was lost in Donatella's return to a dare and the third floor, another story for the stairway walls and ceiling promising to never tell unless she did.

Alessandro was laying her costume out on his bed.

"I can't wear that."

He looked her over as never before. "Shall we see?" He realized her concern. "The door closes."

She finally felt like a bride on her wedding night.

"Are you ready?" He laughed in the anticlimax of seeing she hadn't changed, and instead was holding up the dress like a shield. He fondled it around her shoulders until she grasped how it should be worn and he could reach out to the bed for the finishing touch. "*Carnevale* is about being there," the face of the disguise was surprisingly soft against hers, its ribbons tied at the back of her head, "as anyone but yourself."

"I see."

"For it's a well-designed *maschera*." He paused, noticing as she did what was on the bottom of the table beside his bed. "Like a box trimmed with diamonds and gold."

"Oh, yes."

"One of a kind."

"I'm sure there are others." She tried to take back her enthusiasm.

A key turned, latch opened, top lifted. "Not with what's inside."

The box's satin lining mourned what impulse gave away.

An accolade for her?

"For safe keeping." He placed more than the present into her hands.

Sleep well tonight. She wished she had taken his advice, but she couldn't stop looking at the explicitly elegant gown hanging on the wardrobe. Nonna would have enjoyed the sight. It was silk and pearl buttoned, curving and billowing white, beribboned in sapphire and trimmed in bronze. Also warm and cold, tight and loose, depending on what the weather and outcome would be. A few hours later she was like a cat that had fallen from an open window, suddenly

finding herself where she both longed and was afraid to be, feeling the hardness of pavement and softness of air.

Alessandro insisted she put on her mask again. "And practice on the way."

"Practice what?"

"Walking like a cat, purring like a cat."

"Really." She wasn't averse to doing so. "I've never seen a blue one."

"You'll see others turning green."

Although her face was immovable and pale, she couldn't hide her pleasure.

"All that's left is for you to rub against my legs."

Alessandro was all in white, as if he had absorbed winter from his hat like a boat with one wind-torn sail to frill topped hose and overly flapped boots. He was wimpled in lacy layers to his shoulders, tightly short coated and cavalier, out of fashion but not style, laddered rows of braid with buttons unfastened to the shine of his shirt also showing through gaping slashes on his sleeves. It would have been a perfect disguise but for the distinctiveness of his stride and attitude of his head exaggerated by a duckbill mask, the shine of his lower lip appearing when his expressive, unmistakable voice did.

Pierrot was at his own pace ahead. Alessandro never expected his servant to behave dutifully and wouldn't have enjoyed him as much if he had, making fun and opportunity of his negligence.

"It seems only Luccoli avoids the carnival." Donatella felt a little invincible herself, gone from domestication to prowling into the depths and shallowness of the city.

"Your aunt keeps it away."

The muddle of streets took them from crookedness to intrigue, banners of laundry to noble standards, crying babies to an absence of children, frying bread overpowered by roasting meat, and creativity in rags somehow competing with costumes of riches. Mayhem was soon spectacle, crookedness and free-for-all turning to conspiracy and costly antics, darkness into light, the sunny sky and *piazza* lifting and expanding the view towards the palace.

How Despina would envy her now. But no sooner than Donatella felt she had arrived, Alessandro was pulling her away.

“Put in your claws. The charade can wait; the *parata* will not.”

He wasn't the only one who thought so. The rush was irresistible and crushing from behind and beside, bodies so hurried, with faces so still, voices muted except for the obscenities anonymity allowed. This was a *Genova* she had never seen, not even in stolen moments on and around her father's ship where profanity wasn't so public.

“Don't be shocked,” Alessandro warned, holding her again with the same freshness that composed and conducted him into favor as well as caressed his way out of it. She saw nothing of the street or the church ringing its bells or any other building, as she was also both hidden and exposed in the riotous push to the city limits. Suddenly society was as mixed up as a stew, aromas fighting and mingling, its consistency thick and smooth, tastes hardy and delicate, altogether not too poor or too rich, bubbling with a shared excitement. Donatella was desperate not to be separated from Alessandro, for what way was there backwards or forwards without him? She needn't have worried, his voice distinctly above so much shouting or singing, in solo demanding *make way, make way for a questionable gentleman and his catty companion*.

“Only as she's soft and unimpressionable,” he qualified when Donatella accepted his hand for all to see but not know who they were.

“Where are we going?”

“Through the gates of heaven.” He appreciated her doubt. “Well, for now what's ahead.”

“Look out!”

“They're coming!”

The warnings weren't about but for them, Alessandro too impulsive to listen to reason, taking her towards the city's east gate and not a moment too soon off to one side. They felt the sound and vibration of a near escape and then the way up a cold spiraling staircase that barely fit their feet or Donatella's skirt, Alessandro cursing that the second floor door to the battlement was locked. After pointlessly pounding on it, he went back down and out on the bridge, joining his lunacy to hers, hanging and waving over the parapet.

“*Bravo! Bravo!* All the city is a stage.” He directed common chaos with more investment than a *cantata*, enjoying the artlessness in the strumming, plucking, piping and cranking, banging on pots, and singing from throats. He was even more excited by jugglers, acrobats, stilt-walkers,

fire-eaters, monkeys, magicians, pickpockets, and pimps keeping a close eye on their harlots but also virgins with crowns and bouquets of flowers.

Nothing personified the spirit of *Carnevale* more than the *Commedia dell'Arte* characters of *Pulcinella*, *Zanni*, and *Arlechino* like puppets on strings.

"I should've brought my *violino*. Then we would be the cat and the fiddle.

She smiled because he assumed she knew that nursery rhyme.

"Hey, Maestro. I'm higher than you." Golone's voice was victorious at the top of the tower Alessandro had failed to conquer.

"Yet I have farther to fall."

They might have flown down to the street, trailing the parade less and less distinct from the crowd swollen like a woman with child who couldn't avoid shame whether legitimate or not. Suddenly Alessandro's handling of street songs in his confident tenor drew more attention and applause.

"Sing. As I know you can." he demanded of her.

She couldn't refuse him anything, not even the embarrassment of singing in the midst of more people than she had seen in her entire life. There was nothing familiar about the songs everyone else seemed to know, the dialect one she had rarely heard and barely understood.

"*Bravo my gattino.*" Alessandro's carnival face leaned close to hers.

Before she could be pleased he gave into his proclivity for trying to seduce all the ladies open to him, which seemed to be the youngest and prettiest, although painted masks, high feathers, and low dresses might have made them more attractive than they were. It was amazing she didn't lose him there and then, the surge even more chaotic on its way back towards the ducal palace and into its square that embraced everyone and anyone on *Martedì Grasso*.

"We are here." A white glove signaled above heads and expectation. "*Per favore*. Make way. Make way."

Waves of revelers didn't know who directed them but calmed and parted nonetheless, so that Donatella found a fairly safe way through.

Still she nearly drowned in Alessandro's frothiness, belying his unfathomable depths, for he hardly wanted to take them to the restrictions at the palace's steps. Once there he tried to talk around the guards dressed as Spanish Captains, squirming as he searched in all those places a man's clothes might hold more than himself, finally displaying and kissing the paper with the necessary seal of approval. "We're in," he proclaimed, although they only climbed a few steps to the western entrance where nothing was rehearsed, overcrowded with inferior entertainment and other pretenders.

"We're not," Donatella murmured as they faced a large studded door, the merman *Triton* its knocker, two statuesque Dorias and an equally stone-faced guard standing alongside it.

Alessandro had his invitation ready.

"I can't let you in."

"There's no other way up?"

"That's the point, signor."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I don't need to know, signor."

"Come on, Sandro. There's plenty of wine and mischief down here." Lonati was coming up the steps.

"Ah. *Scaramuccia*, boastful coward. I'd know you anywhere."

No one could pretend to be hunchbacked with the straightforwardness of Lonati in silken black from head to toe, the *chittare* strapped around him suddenly swinging to his chest and nimble hands.

Donatella wasn't sure whether to be worried or amused.

"You didn't bring your violin?"

"No. I was invited to accompany this *signorina*."

"I see." Lonati circled Donatella. "Meeeoow. Do I know this stray?" He lifted her cape and tried to lick her arm.

Alessandro slapped him away.

"Just keeping in character. A small, fast fray, little touch here, short attack there."

"How clever. Coming to *Carnevale* as yourself."

“The heavens have only one sun, but earth has many *Scaramuccias*.”

Alessandro was clearly frustrated, turning to the guard again. “Why not let us in?”

“I have orders.”

“From whom?”

“Those who can give them.”

“Please. It doesn’t matter.” Donatella touched his clenched hand.

Alessandro was as irritated by her appeal as by doors that wouldn’t open. The bottle put in his hands was some consolation, like the music Lonati had already lowered himself to, surprisingly agile jumping around as he played the guitar and sang with a strong voice. Someone insisted Donatella drink and then dance, which she refused to do until she was spinning with anyone who was anyone else. She didn’t know what she was doing or saying or hoping, her head lighter than her feet, laughing and crying, barely holding onto Nonna’s opera cloak. And where was her dignity, passed from one to another, nothing as it seemed? Mockery and emulation were everywhere taking chances and changing circumstances so the butcher was a baker, banker a bandit, servant a master, noble a villain, man a woman, one attraction like another in the arms of a sailor.

The music slowed, a neckerchief recalling to her mind a time when she was not yet plain, a dance as intimate as it could be before it was interrupted.

The palace was suddenly open to Alessandro, and so to her.

“I have different orders now.” The guard was still expressionless.

The early evening sunlight was very warm against their backs as they entered the palace, inside weakly illuminating a vast arching atrium from porticoed and fountained courtyards either side. Command as much as invitation hurried them across a marbled floor and up a double staircase, at the top a privileged and premeditated *Carnevale* custom-made in the finest fabricated layers, cock feathers and conceit sweeping and strutting and posing. The *loggias* were crowded with an entitled few increased by association. Shamelessness was bulging and dazzling, hedonism heightened and ambivalent in hair and shoes and sexuality, thin laughter and heavy scents. Music was a background to drinking and talking and dancing. There were

even more daring activities in public rooms where heads lifted, shoulders turned, masks stared gorgeous and grotesque; a sense all the underhandedness of the city was there.

Alessandro didn't deny Donatella's concern but wouldn't let it stop them moving towards benevolent inspection.

The princess was waiting for what she had invented. Donatella curtsied and raised her sight to the golden features and rays of Anna Pamphilj, motioned closer by a chiffon sleeve and glaring ring. She tried to apologize, at least for stepping on the princess' skirt.

"My dear, my dear. You are here. That is what matters."

"You're generous, Excellency," Donatella also spoke gratefully for the clothes and chance given her.

"Is she not perfect?" the princess said to Alessandro.

He was spontaneous and deliberate, removing his hat and dropping his mask to kiss the princess' cheek, anything else he showed forever lost to the sudden awareness that they weren't alone with her plan. The prince offered the first and weakest challenge, giving his identity away by the skill with which his wife placated him.

It was more difficult to know who else protested, "Be careful of the company you keep, Anna," their interest moving from curious to morbid, murmurings soft and louder.

"Let the entertainer stay with the entertainment."

"To only play with their reputations!" A laugh didn't lighten the mood.

"But who is she?"

"A singer?"

"An actress?"

"She has the look of—"

"No one!"

"Sandro, take the almost English signorina away," the princess ordered. "Go find some merriness. There is none here!"

Alessandro drank a half-filled glass of wine from a tray, smiling until he masked himself again, swearing as he was stopped by a forceful arm.

"Signor Stradella, we don't mean to end your music making."

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The mockery in white either laughed or shivered. "You couldn't do that, *Signore Lomellino*."

"And how do you know me?"

There was a pause. "As I do my own folly."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The sun was going down. When they came out of the palace everyone was drunkenly good-humored and even deeper in deception, Alessandro wanting to catch up. An unknown minstrel offered him a *violino piccolo* but he let others show their talents and Donatella attention, which she discouraged by staying forbearingly close to him, even as he blew a kiss to a first story window. Golone was there and gone again, Lonati playing his part and the guitar comically. Donatella couldn't admit anything except being uncomfortable, not laughing at the joke or forgetting she might seem one herself. Instead she drank, too, faster than she could swallow, wine spilling out of the corners of her mouth.

"Basta. Basta." Alessandro was hypocritical and correct in taking the bottle away from her. "Or you won't be standing for the fireworks."

She stayed alert if not steady, her body shrinking, stomach upset by not eating sooner and then too much grease and garlic, caught in an over-gathering of people as though her fate belonged to every one of them. She begged Alessandro to take her home yet was glad he refused. The stars formed constellations, shining and fading, rising and falling and looking down on them. There were oohs and aahs, hurrahs, and even applause for the elevated of Genoa struggling to be distinguished on the classically columned terrace, removing their masks so there wasn't any doubt who succeeded. "Are they performing for us, or are we for them?" someone asked and was silenced, torches held up with allegiance and even cheers. Alessandro pressed Donatella to consider another observation, turning them into lovers, hugging her back, his arm lifting. "Look there!" She didn't see anything but her undoing, actually closing her eyes and feeling what might do it, his body undisguised for a more private awareness of her own. There was an explosion and she jumped, settling into his humor and wondering if he could tell she smiled. "Ah, now you really are purring!" She couldn't stop what was happening, but who could? Over the bay a sacrificial piece of sky was torn apart, iridescent colors bursting and shooting and spraying, offering the spectacle of war without casualty, although there was no telling where its sparks landed and what might be damaged, as her father had learned when a

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fire on his ship smoldered for hours. "Enjoy! And damn the consequence!" Alessandro D.M.
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shook her, even lifted her, along with the crescendo of the spectacle. The known and unknown world illuminated, any clouds seeming to flee, doubts convinced captivity must take the chance of finally letting loose, *Genova* conceding there were no losers as *Carnevale* went up in smoke and out with a final bang. Alessandro wasn't the only one carrying it on a little longer, at least until Lent was undeniable. But he made his own fireworks, ignited by drinking as much as quickly as he could and poking fun he thought he could get away with, finally taking Lonati's guitar and character, strumming like an amateur and bowing down to beggars and kings. *Scaramuccia* may or may not have minded but *Pierrot* certainly enjoyed master as servant serving a few *puttane* instead, touching their hair like the *Romano* and fondling their breasts, too, because there was no point in being accused of something he didn't do. Alessandro might have cared for a reaction other than the flattery of friends and curiosity of strangers, a street performer—albeit a superior one—courting an audience he didn't need for long, enjoying what he didn't understand, impersonating others to disown himself. He was in trouble and yet saw none in playing for a lower public and stakes, appreciating what appreciated him while not concerned with opinion. He wasn't alone in underestimating the risk; it seemed only Donatella realized its escalation in his stumbling and singing as fisherman or *basso*, then *castrato*. So he thought of what was higher than it should have been, going down to his hands and knees. "Who are you? Gentleman or rogue?" someone in the crowd shouted. "Is there any difference?" someone else joined in. "Don't you know? Don't you see?" Alessandro crawled around, putting his nose to the ground. "Oink. Oink." "No, who?" "Are you blind? How can you not know?" He lifted his head and squealed. "There are so many—" "Enough pork for some." "What a charade." "*Mio Dio!* I'm Signore Lomellino." "Which one?" A House Near Luccoli 179

"You know. There's no mistaking. The *prosciutto crudo* of men. I go well with half-baked bread and onions. So I stink even more." Alessandro got up and saluted the guards, ready to leave the *piazza* without their encouragement, insisting Golone do his duty if he could get his legs to move in any direction. They might have gone immediately home or even into the Cathedral for a glimpse of salvation, instead walking towards the port where the sky burning made the fog heavier and Donatella was always at risk of impulse. For once Golone kept close, for his own safety; unlikely he considered himself a chaperon. Alessandro didn't even hold her hand; he was quiet and almost sad as she followed him to

the end of the pier to see what they could of the stars gone into memory, the new moon making the night old, the sea lost in the smallness of slapping against an aching dock. Although when the bells of the city struck midnight his voice was seductive—“Ah, so we remember what must be given up”—or so she heard it, convinced of his intention because of the embarrassment of her own. Of course there were still insecurities, Alessandro an alley cat to her fettered feline, knowing his way around the night and creatures offering pleasure and pain. There was no mistaking the remnants of flowers and fish and fowl in the *Piazza Banchi*, lending itself to commerce and corruption. “Where *Genova* feeds and starves.” Alessandro picked up the pace again with the excuse of needing to get Donatella back, “before Despina accuses me of abduction.”