



MARGUERITE KAYE

HIS
RAGS-TO-RICHES
Contessa

MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

Marguerite Kaye

His Rags-To-Riches Contessa

Аннотация

From the streets of London.....to Venetian high society!A Matches Made in Scandal story: To catch his father's murderer, broodingly arrogant Conte Luca del Pietro requires help from a most unlikely source—Becky Wickes, London's finest card-sharp. Against the decadence of Carnival, Becky's innocence and warmth captivates Luca, but as their chemistry burns hotter the stakes in their perilous game are getting higher. For Luca is no longer playing only for justice—but also to win Becky's heart...

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Matches Made in Scandal series

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Book 3—*His Rags-to-Riches Contessa*

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“From Governess to Countess is an engaging story, it dazzles you with the chemistry between Allison and Aleskei and teases you into wanting more.”

—*Goodreads* on *From Governess to Countess*

“Kaye’s eye for detail is as sharp as her ability to translate history into engaging fiction... *From Courtesan to Convenient Wife* is an emotionally urgent and tender romance.”

—*All About Romance* on *From Courtesan to Convenient Wife*

MARGUERITE KAYE writes hot historical romances from her home in cold and usually rainy Scotland, featuring Regency rakes, Highlanders and sheikhs. She has published over forty

books and novellas. When she's not writing she enjoys walking, cycling (but only on the level), gardening (but only what she can eat) and cooking. She also likes to knit and occasionally drink martinis (though not at the same time). Find out more at her website: margueritekaye.com.

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His Rags-to-Riches Contessa

Marguerite Kaye

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ISBN: 978-1-474-07411-7

HIS RAGS-TO-RICHES CONTESSA

© 2018 Marguerite Kaye

Published in Great Britain 2018

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1

London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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For Wendy Loveridge,
for being such a loyal and supportive reader,
a wise and wonderful woman,
and a wise and wonderful friend.

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Prologue

London—Autumn 1818

The woman The Procurer had come in search of had once been a regular street performer in the piazza at Covent Garden. The Procurer had seen her in action several times, and had been impressed by her skills and ability to work the crowd, particularly admirable in one so young. Becky Wickes's looks, no less than her sleight-of-hand tricks, had always drawn a large audience, for she was dramatically beautiful, with huge violet eyes, sharp cheekbones, a sensual mouth and a lush figure. When she passed the hat round she garnered a healthy collection of coins, though about a year ago, by The Procurer's reckoning, she had abruptly disappeared from her usual pitch. It was clear now, from the very public scandal in which she was embroiled, and which the gutter press had naturally made the most of, what she had been doing in the interim.

The Procurer entered the infamous rookery of St Giles in the wake of her guide, a local urchin, son of one of her less salubrious contacts. Her target had not been at all easy to trace, but then people who so desperately needed to disappear rarely were. With very good reason in this case. Members of the royal family, even minor ones, had a long and powerful reach. It had been a very grave mistake on Miss Wickes's part to be caught in the act of

fleeing one such.

The Procurer sidestepped the foul sewer which ran down the middle of the narrow alleyway, executing another sidestep in order to avoid landing on the rotting carcass of a small mammal she did not care to identify. A gaggle of rough-looking men were drinking from pewter tankards outside one of the rookery's many gin shops. She could feel their sharp, curious glances stabbing like knives in her back. Her black cloak was plain enough, but the quality of the wool would be sufficient to make her stand out. As would her looks. The Procurer was indifferent to her singular beauty, but she was not fool enough to deny its existence.

As her child guide led her ever deeper into the rookery, the alleyway narrowed. Hatches from the cellars had been flung open to allow the fetid air to escape the subterranean living areas. Even one woman rescued from this ocean of misery and deprivation was a victory, however small. As her guide pointed to the open door of a dark and gloomy close, The Procurer resisted the impulse to scatter her purse of loose change at the feet of the rattle-taggle band of followers her progress had attracted. When she was done here, and returned to safer streets, there would be ample time for dispensing such alms. To do so now might jeopardise not only her mission but her personal safety.

'Stay here and do not move,' she told the boy firmly. 'You remember what you are to do if I do not return within the hour?'

Waiting only on his nod of affirmation, she ascended the worn steps to the third-floor landing, rapping sharply on the

first door to the right. There was no answer. Accustomed to encountering both suspicion and fear during this critical first meeting, The Procurer knocked again, listening intently. Yes, there was someone on the other side of the door, she could not so much hear as sense the tension emanating from them. ‘Miss Wickes,’ she said quietly, her tone conciliatory, ‘I come alone, and as a friend.’

After a brief pause, the door opened a fraction. The woman who peered at her in the dim light bore little resemblance to the one The Procurer recalled from Covent Garden. Her formerly glossy mane of black hair was dull, piled in a tangled knot of curls on top of her head. Her violet eyes were darkly shadowed, the slant of her cheekbones so pronounced she looked almost gaunt. ‘What do you want? Who are you?’ Her panic was evident from the way her eyes darted over The Procurer’s shoulder.

‘I merely wish to speak to you, Miss Wickes.’ The Procurer stuck her foot against the jamb just in time to prevent the door being slammed in her face. ‘You need not be alarmed. I am not here to have you clapped in irons, but to put a proposition to you.’ Taking the woman completely by surprise, she pushed her way in. ‘Now, do you have the makings of a cup of tea? I would very much appreciate one.’

A startled peal of laughter greeted this remark. ‘Would you indeed?’ Hands on hips, Becky Wickes surveyed The Procurer through narrowed eyes. ‘What in the devil’s name is a woman like you doing in a place like this? Who are you?’

‘They call me The Procurer. Perhaps you have heard of me?’

Becky felt her jaw drop. ‘All of London has heard tell of you.’ She studied the intruder in her expensive wool cloak more carefully. ‘You aren’t how I pictured you. I thought you’d be much older. I certainly didn’t think you’d be a beauty.’

‘Then both our expectations have been confounded, Miss Wickes. Despite your own very striking beauty, you bear little resemblance to the woman I used to admire, performing in the Covent Garden piazza.’

‘That’s because I ain’t working the piazza no more,’ Becky said, deliberately lapsing into the harsh accent of her cockney roots. ‘What I’m wondering,’ she continued in her more cultured voice, ‘is what *my* appearance has to do with your appearance here?’

The Procurer, however, did not seem inclined to explain herself. Instead she nodded approvingly. ‘I knew, from watching you perform, that you were an accomplished actress. It is reassuring to know that you have also an excellent ear.’

‘You saw me on the stage? I’ve not trod the boards for nearly five years.’

‘I was referring to your performances in Covent Garden piazza. I confess, your strong local accent was something which did concern me. I am vastly relieved to discover it is not a problem.’

‘That is indeed a relief,’ Becky responded in a mocking and flawless imitation of The Procurer’s own accent with its faint

Scottish lilt.

‘I do not intend any slight or offence,’ The Procurer said. ‘Firstly, for reasons which will become clear, it is important that your voice does not betray your humble origins. And secondly, I am relieved because your facility with language indicates that you will find a foreign tongue as easy to master as the accent of those who call themselves our betters here in London.’

Becky snorted. ‘Judging from your own accent, madam, I’d say that you are in the other camp.’

‘I would have thought that you would know better than to judge by appearances, Miss Wickes, for they can be very deceptive. The performer I observed executing those sleight-of-hand tricks was a very confident, almost arrogant individual. Very different from the female standing before me now. Your alter ego had a certain air about her, one may say.’

‘One might.’ Becky eyed her astonishing visitor with respect. Any doubts she’d had about the woman’s claim to be the mysterious Procurer vanished. ‘Most people only see what you want them to see.’

‘That is my experience, certainly.’

‘So there’s another woman behind The Procurer, then? I wonder...’

‘I suggest most strongly that you dampen your curiosity.’ The frigid tone made Becky take an instinctive step back. ‘The first of my terms,’ The Procurer continued, ‘is that you will neither speculate nor enquire about me. And before you answer, let me

assure you, Miss Wickes, that I will know if you do.'

Formidable, that was what the woman was. Well, so too was Becky, but she also knew there was a time for facing up to people, and a time for backing down. If she wanted to hear what The Procurer had to offer, then she'd better comply with The Procurer's terms. 'Fine,' she said, throwing her hands in the air. 'No questions. You have my word. And it can be relied on, I promise.'

She was rewarded with an approving smile. 'I believe you. Now, to business. *Do* you have tea?'

'I do, though I reckon you'll think I'm serving you dishwater. If you will sit down I'll see to it.'

The Procurer took a seat at the table, pinching off her gloves and unfastening her cloak, making no effort to disguise her surveillance of Becky's spartan room. That clear, frankly intimidating gaze took in every detail: the rickety bed with its cast-iron headboard and thin cover wedged into the corner; the tin kettle on the hearth and the battered teapot beside it; the mismatched china cups and saucers which Becky set out on the scarred table with the wobbly leg. 'I had heard that until your major faux pas you were rather successful in your... Let's call them endeavours,' she said, as Becky sat down opposite her, 'but I see none of the trappings of that success here.'

'Major faux pas!' Becky repeated scornfully. 'That's one way of putting it, and a lot more generous than some.'

'I've seen the reports in the press. Written with a view to selling

copy rather than telling the truth, of course. I prefer to rely on my own sources, Miss Wickes, and I believe I know enough of your circumstances to think that you have been, if you will forgive the pun, dealt a very poor hand.'

'But one I dealt myself,' Becky said bitterly.

'Really?' The Procurer raised one perfectly arched brow. 'I was informed that the plan was hatched by a certain Jack Fisher.'

Becky gave a scornful snort of laughter. 'Your sources, as you call them, are impressively well informed. It was his idea all right.' Her face fell, and her mouth thinned. 'But it was my decision to go along with it, all the same. Even though I knew—but there, it's done now, and at least I've had my eyes opened where Jack Fisher is concerned. I should never have trusted him.'

'Console yourself with the fact that it is a mistake countless women have made with other such charmers.'

Was that the voice of experience she was hearing? Becky opened her mouth to ask, remembering her promise not to do so just in time. 'Well, *I* won't be making that mistake again,' she said instead. 'Once bitten twice shy, as they say.'

'I prefer my own mantra. Onwards and upwards.' The Procurer took a dainty sip of her tea, her face registering mild distaste.

'I did warn you,' Becky said, surprised to discover that she could be embarrassed over a stupid thing like tea. 'Dishwater, like I said, not whatever exotic blend you're used to.'

She expected a polite denial. She was surprised when The Procurer smiled ruefully. 'My apologies. I am fortunate enough

to have a friend in the tea trade who indulges my passion for the beverage.’ She set the cup to one side. ‘Tell me, have you always resided here in St Giles?’

Becky shrugged. ‘Here and hereabouts. It’s the safest place to be, for those of us born and raised here, and the most dangerous for unwelcome visitors who were not. How did you find me? Was it Jack who tipped you off?’

‘I have not had the misfortune to meet your paramour. In fact I’m reliably informed that he is en route to the New World.’

‘I would rather you’d been reliably informed that he was on his way to the underworld,’ Becky said sharply. Flushing, she covered her mouth. ‘I don’t really mean that.’ The Procurer raised an enquiring brow. ‘Don’t get me wrong, he’s a lying, cheating—’ She broke off, digging her nails into her hands. ‘I wish I’d never set eyes on him. I fell hook, line and sinker for his handsome face and his charming ways and his lies. He played me like a fish, and I was gullible enough to believe every sweet nothing he whispered in my ear.’

Becky forced herself to unfurl her fingers, acutely aware of the cool gaze of the woman sitting opposite her. ‘I’ve learnt my lesson,’ she said with a grim little smile. ‘From now on, whatever happens in the future, it’ll be down to me and me alone.’

She’d meant to sound confident. Defiant. But something in her voice or her expression betrayed her thoughts. The Procurer reached across the table, briefly touching her fingers with her own. ‘It can be done, Becky. A fresh start. A new you.’

‘You sound so certain. How can you be so sure?’

‘Trust me, I speak from experience.’ The hand was withdrawn. The Procurer was all business again. ‘You can escape from here. The proposition I have for you will reward you sufficiently to set you up for life, whatever life you choose to lead, without having to rely on any man. Are you interested?’

‘What do you think?’

The Procurer eyed her coolly. ‘I think, Miss Wickes, that despite acting foolishly, you are very far from being a fool. A woman from your disadvantaged background, who has survived by her wits rather than succumbing to the many lucrative offers a beauty such as yourself must have been presented with is very much to be admired. I think that you deserve a second chance and I am in a position to offer you just that. As it so happens I am looking for someone with your unique combination of talents.’

A second chance! For two weeks Becky had been in hiding from the authorities, constantly dreading a knock on the door, left to take her chances by the man she had naively trusted, quite literally, with her life as it turned out. Hope flickered inside her. Becky tried to ignore it. ‘I want no part of it, if it means using my skills at the gaming tables to line someone else’s pockets.’

‘Isn’t that precisely what you did for Jack Fisher?’

‘It is, though I never knew it. Until I met Jack, my only aim was to keep belly from backbone. It was his idea, to move from the piazza to the tables. It took him a year to persuade me, and I only ever did it because I believed the pack of lies he spun.’

‘Had you been less principled, Miss Wickes, with a talent such as yours, you would not be living in a place like this. Pray accept my compliments, and my assurances that the assignment I have in mind for you does not require you to use your most considerable skills to enrich my client in any monetary sense.’

‘Thank you. I appreciate that. I’d like to know what it is your client does require of me.’

‘Some ground rules first, Miss Wickes. I must have your solemn promise that you will never disclose the details to anyone.’

‘That I can easily promise. I told you, I’ve learnt my lesson. Trust no one. Rely on no one except myself.’

‘A commendable maxim. You should also know that you have no obligation to disclose any details of your life or your history to my client unless you choose to do so.’

Becky’s eyebrows shot up. ‘He doesn’t know who I am?’

‘I have a reputation for making the impossible possible. My clients come to me with complex and unusual problems requiring unique solutions. Solutions they cannot, by implication, come up with themselves. He need know nothing more than you choose to tell him.’

Becky frowned. ‘So he doesn’t even know you’re talking to me?’

‘Nor will he, unless you accept the contract offered. The reward for which, as I mentioned, is considerable.’

She quoted a sum so large Becky thought she must have

misheard, but when she asked to repeat it, the number was the same. Becky whistled under her breath. ‘That’s enough to set me up for life, and then some. I’d never have to work again.’

‘A life-changing amount.’

‘A life-saving amount! Enough to get me far from here before they find me and make an example of me by stretching my neck.’ Becky finished her cold tea and fixed The Procurer with a defiant stare. ‘Robbery and fraud, they’d hang me for, you know, and they’d have every right. I cheated. It doesn’t matter that he could well afford to lose, I still cheated.’

‘You did not act alone. Your partner in crime...’

‘Is halfway across the Atlantic by now with his pockets full of gold,’ Becky said impatiently. ‘What a fool I was.’

‘Love can make a fool of the best of women, sadly.’

‘Love! It doesn’t just make a fool of us, it makes us blithering idiots. I thought the earth, moon and stars revolved around Jack Fisher. All I ever wanted was to make him happy. Was that love? I was certainly in thrall to him.’ To Becky’s shame, tears smarted in her eyes. She brushed them away angrily. She’d cried enough tears to mend the most broken of hearts. ‘Never again. I’ve learnt my lesson the hard way. As you have, I reckon,’ she added pointedly.

For the first time, The Procurer failed to meet Becky’s eyes. ‘To continue with my rules of engagement,’ she said brusquely, ‘if you accept this assignment, my client will require your unswerving loyalty. He will also require you to complete the

terms of your contract to the letter. The terms, as I mentioned, are generous. I should caution you, however, that you will be paid only upon successful completion of your assignment. Half measures will not be rewarded. If you leave before the task is completed, you will return to England without any remuneration.'

'Return to England?' Her anger and embarrassment forgotten, Becky leaned forward eagerly in her seat. 'Where am I to go? Is your client a foreigner? Is that why you mentioned my—what did you call it?—ear for language? I can't imagine—'

'No, I don't expect you can,' The Procurer interrupted, laughing softly. 'Let me enlighten you.'

Chapter One

Venice, Kingdom of Lombardy– Venetia—November 1818

Drizzly rain was softly falling as Becky embarked on the final stage of her long journey from London, which consisted of the short sea crossing from the nearby mainland port of Mestre to the island of Venice itself. The black gondola which she had boarded with some trepidation a few hours ago made her think of a funeral barge, or some sort of huge menacing aquatic creature with a vicious golden beak. The crossing was choppy, and the *felze*, the poky little cabin which straddled the central seats, afforded her no view of her destination. Clutching gratefully at the gondolier's hand as she climbed the narrow flight of slippery stairs on the jetty, she felt completely disoriented.

The first thing she noticed was that the rain had stopped. The sky had turned from leaden grey to an eerie brackish pink, tinged with pewter. The waters of what she assumed must be the Grand Canal were no longer churning but calm, glinting green and brown and grey, echoing but not mirroring the sky. The air felt heavy, making everything sound muted and muffled. She felt as if she were in a shadowland, as if the gondola had transported her to some mystical place.

Casting around her, Becky began to distinguish the buildings

which slowly emerged from the mist, as if voile curtains were being pulled back from a stage set. Somehow she hadn't imagined that the houses would look as if they were actually floating on the water. Their reflections shimmered, creating a replica underwater ghost city. There were palaces as far as the eye could see, jostling for position on the Grand Canal, encrusted with intricately worked stonework as fine as lace, adorned with columns, a veritable menagerie of stone creatures prowling and crouching, standing sentinel on the flat rooftops.

She shivered, entranced, overawed and struck by an acute attack of nerves. She had been travelling for weeks. The journey had been meticulously arranged, leaving her little to do but hand over her travelling papers to be validated, keep an eye on her luggage and get herself from carriage to boat to carriage to boat, the world changing so quickly and dramatically before her eyes that she could only marvel at the different vistas, listen to the changing notes and tones of the languages, all the while trying to appear the world-weary traveller lest anyone mistake her for a flat and try to rob her of her meagre funds.

But now she was in Venice, her final destination, about to meet the man on whom her carefree future depended. Conte Luca del Pietro lived right here, in the Palazzo Pietro, on whose steps she was now, presumably, standing. By the looks of it, it was one of the grandest palaces of all those which lined the Grand Canal. Craning her neck, Becky counted three storeys, which seemed to consist almost entirely of tall glass double doors, separated by

columns. A balcony ran the length of the first floor. Lions stood guard all along the parapet of the roof. There was a coat of arms on a shield right above the huge arched double doors, which were being thrown open by two servants in green and gold livery. A third, imperious member of the household, clearly a butler or major-domo, made his stately way to her side. ‘*Signorina?* If you please, come this way.’

Stomach clenched with nerves, knees like jelly, Becky followed in his wake as the servant led her into the Palazzo Pietro, where she was relieved of her travelling cloak, hat and gloves. The hallway was patterned in a complicated mosaic of black and white tiles. The walls were hung with tapestries. The ceiling, soaring high above her, was elaborately corniced. There was a chandelier so enormous she couldn’t imagine how it could be secured so as not to crash to the ground. She barely had time to register anything else as she was swept up a staircase with an intricately carved balustrade, three short flights set at right angles to each other, before they reached the first floor. The middle one of five sets of double doors was flung open.

‘*Signorina Wickes, Conte del Pietro,*’ the servant announced, nudging her forward.

The doors were closed behind her. The room in which she stood was staggering. The ceiling was painted with a host of angels and cherubs, peeping from behind fluffy white clouds, gambolling naked in the celestial blue sky, and haughtily strumming on harps and lyres. Another breathtakingly beautiful

chandelier glittered and sparkled, reflecting the light which streamed in through the windows on to the highly polished floor. Shelves of decorative china and plates lined the walls. There were clusters of chaises longues, sofas and chairs, scatterings of tables bearing busts, ormolu clocks and garnitures. Outside, the canal had changed colour again, now buttery yellow and seaweed green.

Dazzled, Becky did not notice the man at first. He must have been sitting in one of the chairs facing out of the window. But as he got to his feet and began to make his way towards her, she forgot all about the opulence of her surroundings.

‘Luca del Pietro,’ he said, making a slight bow. ‘I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Wickes.’

Becky dropped into a curtsy, her knees all but giving way. Rising awkwardly, she followed him, taking the seat he indicated by the window, aware that she was staring, but unable to drag her eyes away from the man who was throwing himself carelessly into the chair opposite, one long boot-clad leg crossed over the other. A count, The Procurer had informed her, the product of an Italian father and English mother. Becky had imagined—blooming heck, it didn’t matter what she had imagined, this man couldn’t be more different.

His hair was raven black, silky soft and too long for current fashion, reaching the collar of his shirt. His brows were thick, fiercely arched, his eyes a warm chocolate brown. A strong nose, sharp cheekbones, a decided chin. A small, meticulously

trimmed goatee beard of the style favoured by Walter Raleigh, appropriately enough, for this man looked more like a pirate than a count. Dangerous—yes, very. And wild—that too. Then he smiled at her, and Becky's stomach flipped. Dear heavens, but that smile would melt ice.

'I must tell you, Miss Wickes, that your appearance is not at all what I expected.'

He spoke English with a trace of an Italian accent. His lips were pale pink against the clean, precise line of his beard, sensual, almost feminine. Not that there was anything at all feminine about the Count. Quite the contrary. There was a litheness, a suppleness in the sleek lines of the body lounging with catlike languor in the chair that made her think of him pacing the decks of a ship with the same feline grace. Becky, who had been certain that experience had numbed her to all male charms, was alarmed to discover that she was wrong.

'Conte del Pietro,' she said, relieved to hear that her voice sounded surprisingly calm, 'how do you do?'

She was rewarded with another of those smiles. 'I do very well now that you are here, Miss Wickes. Will you take some refreshment? We have a great deal to discuss. Though perhaps you are tired from the journey. Would you like to see your room first?'

Becky shook her head decisively. She had regained her composure—or near enough so that this stranger wouldn't notice, she hoped. First impressions were more important than anything.

This was no time for first-night nerves. The stage was set. Now she had to deliver the required performance. She smiled politely. ‘I’m not one bit tired, thank you very much. What I am is extremely curious to know exactly what it is you require of me. So if you don’t mind, let’s get down to business.’

Luca couldn’t help it, he laughed. Despite all the tales he’d heard of the woman who called herself The Procurer, despite the personal recommendation he’d managed to extract from a very senior member of the British government, and despite the enormous advance he’d already paid, part of him had doubted that the woman would deliver anyone suitable, let alone this extraordinary female sitting opposite him. *To business*, Miss Wickes insisted, but Luca was in no mood to proceed just yet. ‘I know from the time I’ve spent in England,’ he said, getting to his feet to pull the bell rope at the mantelpiece, ‘that you like to take tea before you do anything. Tell me, how was your journey?’

‘Gruelling,’ she replied in a tone that made it clear she was in no mood for small talk. ‘But I’m here now, so if you don’t mind...’

‘All in good time,’ Luca said as his major-domo arrived with the tea. He could sense her impatience watching the tea service being laid out with the slow, deliberate care with which Brunetti executed every action. When finally the doors closed behind the servant again, he was pretty sure he heard Miss Wickes exhale with relief. ‘Would you like to pour?’ he asked her, sitting back down.

To her credit, she did not demur. To her credit also, she did

not falter in the ritual, spooning the tea from the lacquered caddy, pouring the boiling water into the silver pot, the milk into the china cups with the steadiest of hands. Evidence of her skills with the cards, or a genteel upbringing? Luca wondered. Her accent was not the cut-glass, clipped tone of the English aristocracy which he found so grating, but nor did it have the burr of a peasant woman—which was hardly surprising, and a great relief. Venice was no place for a rustic of any nation. ‘You are from London?’ he hazarded, since he knew that was where her journey had commenced.

Miss Wickes paused in the act of raising her teacup to consider this. ‘Yes.’

‘You have lived there always?’

‘Yes.’ Miss Wickes set down her cup. A lustrous jet-black curl fell forward over her forehead. She brushed it impatiently away, before treating him to a prim smile. ‘Something I intend to remedy, with your assistance.’

Luca returned the smile. ‘I was under the impression that I was paying *you* to assist *me*.’

She chuckled. Their gazes snagged, and Luca could have sworn there was a mutual spark of attraction. Then she dropped her eyes, breaking the connection, and he wondered if he’d imagined it on her part simply because he felt it. Her beauty was almost theatrical in its nature, the contrast of those big eyes in that small face, the black-as-night hair and her pale northern European skin, the sharp cheekbones, the full mouth. There was

a sensuality in the way she moved that seemed cultivated and yet guileless. She looked down her small nose in such a haughty manner it made him want to rattle that air of confidence. Yet now he came to look at her again, her hands clasped so tightly together, her shoulders so straight, he had the distinct impression that she was barely holding herself together.

And little wonder! She had scant idea why she was here or what was required of her. What was he thinking, allowing himself to become so distracted when he had been impatiently counting the days and hours waiting for this very moment to arrive? Luca set his empty cup and saucer down on the table. ‘To business, Miss Wickes. Or may I call you Rebecca?’

‘I much prefer Becky.’

Most decidedly she was nervous and trying desperately not to show it. ‘Becky.’ He smiled reassuringly. ‘It suits you. And you must call me Luca.’

‘Luca. Does that mean *lucky*?’

‘Actually it means *light*, but I hope that you will bring me luck, Miss Becky Wickes.’

For some reason, his words made her glower. ‘Before you say any more, I should tell you what I’ve already made very clear to The Procurer. I won’t play cards, straight or crooked, just to win you a fortune.’

‘Did not The Procurer make it very clear that wasn’t at all what I required?’ Luca asked, taken aback by her vehemence. ‘Do I look like a man of meagre means?’

She flinched, for his tone made it clear enough that he'd found her implication offensive, but she did not back down. 'You look like a man of very substantial means,' she said, gazing around the room, 'but I'll play no part in making you even richer.'

'I don't want you to make me rich, Becky. I want you to make another man destitute.'

Some might say it was the same thing. Not this surprising woman. She uncrossed her arms, frowning, leaning forward in her chair, ignoring the glossy curl that fell over her forehead. 'Why on earth would you want to do that?'

'Oh, I have every reason,' Luca said, the familiar wave of anger making his mouth curl into a sneer. 'He killed my father.'

Becky's mouth fell open. She must have misheard him. Or his otherwise excellent English had deserted him. Though the way he had snarled the words made her wonder if he had known exactly what he had said. 'Killed? You don't really mean killed?'

'I mean exactly that. My father was murdered. I intend to make the man responsible pay.'

Becky stared, quite staggered. 'But if it was murder, then surely the law...'

'It is not possible. As far as the law is concerned, no crime has been committed. I cannot rely on the law to deliver justice for my father, I must provide that myself. With your assistance.'

'Bloody hell,' Becky muttered softly under her breath, as much at the transformation in her host as his words. There was a cold fury in his eyes, a bleak set to his mouth. 'When you say justice...'

‘I do not mean an eye for an eye,’ he replied with a smile that made her shiver. ‘This is not a personal vendetta. It is a question of honour, to put right the wrongs inflicted, not only on my father, but on our most beloved city. Also to avenge a betrayal of the very worst kind, for the man who had my father killed was his best friend.’

Becky stared at the man opposite, utterly dumbfounded. Vengeance. Honour. Righting wrongs. ‘The Procurer didn’t tell me any of this—did she know?’

‘*Si*. It is part of her—her terms,’ Luca replied. ‘What is required and why. She promises complete discretion. I am relieved to discover that she is a woman of her word.’

His Italian accent had become more pronounced. He was upset. His father had been murdered, for heaven’s sake, of course he was upset! ‘I’m very sorry, perhaps I’m being slow, but I’m afraid I’m none the wiser.’

Across from her, Luca let out a heavy sigh, making an obvious effort to relax. ‘It is I who should apologise. It is such a very painful subject, I did not anticipate finding myself so—so affected, talking about it.’

‘Would you like another cup of tea?’ Becky said, completely at a loss as to how to respond.

Luca gave a snort of laughter. ‘Tea. You English think it is the cure for everything. Do not be offended. I am not laughing at you, but you will admit, it is funny.’

‘I suppose it is,’ Becky said, simply relieved to have lightened

the tension in him. 'You don't mind if I have a second cup?'

'Please.'

She could feel his eyes on her as she took her time pouring, adding milk, wondering what the devil she was to make of what he'd told her. She took a sip, and he smiled at her again, a warm smile that made her wonder if she'd imagined that formidable stranger.

'I have been so anxiously waiting your arrival,' he said, 'so eager to execute my plan, that I forget you know nothing at all. Naturally, you want to ask questions.'

'But I've no right to ask them,' Becky said, remembering this belatedly. 'You don't need to explain yourself, only tell me what it is you require me to do. I'm remembering, don't worry, that the fee you'll pay guarantees my unswerving loyalty.'

Luca got to his feet, leaning his forehead on the glass of one of the tall windows, staring out at the canal. After a few moments' contemplation, he turned back to face her. 'This is probably going to sound foolish, but I'd much prefer that you helped me because you wanted to, than because you were obliged to.'

'But I am obliged to, if I'm to earn my fee.'

He held out his hand, inviting her to join him at the window. Outside, it was growing dark, the light a strange, iridescent silver, so that she couldn't tell what was water and what was sky. 'My plan requires you to play cards against this man for very high stakes. He is a powerful and influential figure in Venice. He has also demonstrated that he is prepared to be ruthless. It is not

without risk. Did The Procurer explain this to you?

‘She told me if I didn’t like the set-up I could return to England, no questions asked. I won’t be caught, if that’s what you’re concerned about,’ Becky said, dismayed to discover that she didn’t feel anywhere near as confident as she sounded. If Jack hadn’t given the game away, she wouldn’t have been discovered, but it seemed none the less that he’d stolen a bit of her confidence as well as her heart.

‘You’ll be in disguise, of course,’ Luca said. ‘It is Carnevale.’

‘Carnevale?’

‘Carnival. You haven’t heard of it? It is the only time of the year in Venice when gambling is permitted—or at least, when a blind eye is turned. You’ll be wearing a mask and a costume, like everyone else. You will be Regina di Denari, The Queen of Coins, named after one of our Venetian card suits. I thought it was most appropriate, though if you have another suggestion?’

‘Regina di Denari...’ she repeated, savouring the sound of it in Italian. ‘I think it’s perfect. So that’s the part I’m to play?’

‘One of them.’

‘One of them!’

He laughed softly. ‘It is a very large fee you are to earn, after all.’

‘Not large enough, I’m beginning to think,’ Becky retorted. ‘How many other roles are there?’

‘Only one, but it will be quite a contrast to the Queen of Coins.’

‘How much of a contrast?’

‘As day is to night. Like Venice herself, you will have two faces to show to the world. You will be two very different women. Do you think you can manage that?’

‘Of course I can.’ She wished he wouldn’t smile at her like that. She wished that his smile didn’t make her insides churn up. She wished that the view from the window wasn’t so strange and beautiful. She couldn’t quite believe that she was here, that *here* was even real.

‘I can’t quite believe you’re here,’ Luca said, as if he’d read her thoughts. ‘Are you real, Becky Wickes?’

‘As real as you are. And I admit, I’m not at all certain that you are. Maybe this is a dream and I’ve conjured you up.’

‘I’m the one who has been dreaming, dreaming of vengeance. Now that you are here, I can finally act.’

‘It’s me who has to act,’ Becky said, attempting to bring the conversation back to business, trying to ignore the effect the closeness of Luca’s body was having on hers. ‘You still haven’t told me what my other role is.’

‘You will play my painfully shy and gauche English cousin.’ He reached out to brush her hair back from her forehead. He barely grazed her skin but she shivered, though his fingers weren’t in the least bit cold. ‘You are just arrived in Venice,’ Luca continued. ‘Here to acquire a sprinkling of our city’s sophistication, and to provide my mother with some company from her homeland—my mother is English, you know.’

‘It’s one of the few things I do know.’ Becky’s head was

whirling. ‘You want me to play a lady?’

‘A young, beautiful lady, who looks out at the world through those big violet eyes with such charming innocence, who understands none of the intrigue going on around her. Venice is a city full of spies, secret societies, informers. Your arrival will have already been noted, so I must plausibly explain your presence, Cousin Rebecca.’

Was he aware that his hand was still resting on her shoulder? Their toes were almost touching. She could see the bluish hint of growth on his cheeks where he had shaved close to his narrow beard. Was this some sort of audition for the part she was to play? But which part? ‘In England, if I really were your cousin, you would keep your distance. Are things so very different here?’ Their gazes were locked. This was the oddest conversation she’d ever had. Saying one thing. Thinking something else. At least she was, and she was fairly certain he was too. ‘The way you’re looking at me, it’s not at all cousinly, you know.’

He flinched, immediately stepping back. ‘*Mi scusi*. You must not think I assume because I pay for you to come here that you must...’

‘I don’t.’ It hadn’t even occurred to her, though perhaps it should have? But even though she’d only just met him, Becky didn’t think that Luca del Pietro was the type of man to take advantage. Not that she’d any intention of allowing him to.

Her head really was whirling. She needed time to think, to try to make sense of all that Luca had told her, and to work out what

the many gaps were in his story. She needed time to adjust to her surroundings. She was in a foreign country in a floating palace, for heaven's sake, with a count who wanted to avenge himself on the man who had killed his father. 'This whole situation is very strange,' Becky said.

'Of course it is, and I have not made a very good job of explaining it. I suspect you would benefit from a rest. I will have you shown to your room.'

'Thank you.'

'It will be just the two of us dining tonight. My mother...' Luca hesitated. 'I thought it prudent for her to be otherwise engaged. I was not sure, you see, until I met you...'

'Whether I would pass muster,' Becky said. 'Does this mean that I have?'

'You have, and with flying colours, I am delighted to say, because I don't know what I'd have done if you had not. I think that we will work very well together. And before you say it, I know that I have not explained what it is I want you to do or even why, not properly, but I will. Tomorrow, I promise. You will stay, won't you? You will help me?'

He wasn't pleading, exactly, but he wasn't at all sure of her answer. He wanted her, Becky Wickes, to help him, the Conte del Pietro. More than that. He needed her. It made her feel good. 'Of course I will,' Becky said. 'I've come all this way, haven't I? You think I'd turn my back on the small fortune you're going to pay me?'

‘The money means a great deal to you? No, don’t answer that, it’s a stupid question. You would not be here otherwise, would you?’

‘That sort of money, to a woman like me, it’s life-changing,’ Becky said, using The Procurer’s words.

‘I have never met a woman like you, but I’m very glad you are here. I think we are going to make an alliance most *formidable*.’

He lifted her hand to his lips. Still holding her gaze, he pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. The rough brush of his beard, the softness of his lips, was like everything else since she’d arrived, an odd, exciting contrast. Her insides were churning, but Becky managed a cool smile. ‘If you’ll excuse me,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to be late for dinner, especially since I’m meeting my cousin for the first time.’

Chapter Two

A maid showed Becky to her bedchamber on the next floor of the *palazzo*. As the double doors were flung open, she was about to say that there must have been some mistake, before remembering just in time that she was supposed to be Luca's well-born cousin. She supposed the servants had been informed of this, and wondered what on earth they'd make of the shabby wardrobe of clothes she'd brought with her. Lucky for her that she spoke no Italian. It was best not to know.

'Signorina?'

She followed the maid into the room, abandoning any pretence of being at home amid such grandeur as she gazed around her, almost dancing with delight. The vast bedchamber was painted turquoise blue, the same colour seemingly everywhere, making her feel as if she was underwater. Pale blue silk rugs. Blue hangings at the huge windows. They were drawn shut, but Becky guessed they must look out on to the canal. The view would be spectacular in the morning. For now, the room was lit by another of those massive glittering chandeliers. The bed was a four-poster, and bigger than the room in the rookeries she called home. It was so high, so thick with blankets and luxurious quilts, that she reckoned she'd need a step to climb into it. The bed hangings matched the curtains. She couldn't resist smoothing her hand over them. Damask, embroidered with silk. Would there be

silk sheets? She was willing to wager that there would be. Never mind playing Luca's cousin, this room was worthy of a princess.

What wasn't blue was gold—no, gilt, that was the word. Little chairs that looked too dainty to be sat upon. A marble-topped washstand. And a mirror. Catching sight of her reflection brought Becky crashing back to earth. She'd bought her dress in a London street market, second-hand but barely worn, using a chunk of the sum The Procurer had given her to cover her expenses. She'd thought it a good buy, but now even the chambermaid looked better dressed. What must Luca have thought? And what on earth did Luca expect her to change into for dinner, which now she thought about it, was bound to be an ordeal. The opportunities to embarrass herself when it came to etiquette were endless. She owned one evening gown, but it had been bought with the gaming hells of St James's in mind. Her card sharp's costume, revealing far more than it concealed, was designed to divert players' attention from her hands. It was totally inappropriate for dinner with Luca. His demure, innocent English cousin would not own, far less wear, such a provocative garment. Thank the stars she hadn't packed it.

There was a copper bath placed in front of a roaring fire. The maid was erecting screens around it, laying out towels to warm. Becky hadn't expected to be living in the lap of luxury like this. Mind you, it was a double-edged sword, for even as she was relishing her surroundings, she was on tenterhooks, terrified she'd make some terrible gaffe that would give her away. If only

she could dismiss the maid, she could explore properly, throw herself down on to that huge bed and see if it was as soft as it looked, take off her boots and her stockings and curl her toes into the rugs. There would be time enough, she supposed, when everyone was in bed. Her stay here was going to be short-lived, so she should make the most of it while she could. Though she was definitely not about to permit the woman to undress her. Let her think it was an English peculiarity. She was more than capable of undoing her own stays and garters.

No, grazie, she said, shaking her head decidedly, slipping behind the screens. Now she could enjoy some privacy, and she wouldn't have to watch the maid's face as she surveyed Becky's meagre wardrobe, searching in vain for evening wear. Quickly ridding herself of her travelling clothes, she sank into the steaming water with a contented sigh. Were these rose petals? And on the little table, beside another jug of hot water, perfumed soap and some sort of oil.

She closed her eyes, allowing the heat to relax her tense limbs and soothe her jangling nerves. She tried to imagine herself playing the lady, all simpering blushes and saucer-eyed wonder. It would be much more of a challenge than the other part she was to play. The Queen of Coins. *'Regina di Denari,'* she mouthed silently. It sounded much better in Italian. Imperious. Seductive. Like this city. And like Luca, a handsome devil, with a smile that ought to be outlawed.

It wasn't like her to be having such thoughts. Perhaps she had

become infected by Venice's mystique, the magic in the misty air. She had never been free with her favours—quite the contrary—until Jack came along and stole her heart. It made her cringe now, remembering the way her heart fluttered when he smiled at her, the way she'd gaze at him all starry-eyed, only happy when he was happy, miserable when he was not. She'd loved him, there was no denying it. Their kisses had been lovers' kisses—or so she'd thought. At any rate, they were the only kisses she had shared in all of her twenty-two years, and the only ones she'd been interested in, until now. Luca's kisses, she was willing to bet, would be very different.

Becky's eyes opened with a snap. She was *not* interested in kissing Luca. She was going to stop wallowing in this bath, indulging in idle speculation and slowly turning into a prune. Panicking that she would be late for dinner, she sat up, sending water splashing on to the surrounding mats, and picked up the soap.

'Signorina Wickes, Conte del Pietro.'

Luca, who had been carefully twisting the cork to open a bottle of Prosecco, turned as the library doors closed on the servant.

'Must they announce me every time?' Becky asked, hovering in the doorway.

'I'm afraid formality is the order of the day in palace life. Though I must admit that every time they call me Conte del Pietro, I look over my shoulder expecting to see my father. Are you coming in, or do you plan to have your dinner delivered to

you in the doorway?’

‘It’s just that you’re all dressed up and I’m not.’ Becky held out the skirts of her gown. ‘I don’t have any evening clothes. Sorry.’

She was smiling and glowering at the same time. Embarrassed. Luca cursed his own stupidity for having donned the knee breeches and coat that was the custom for dinner at the *palazzo*. ‘It is I who should apologise. This,’ he said, indicating his apparel, ‘is what my father would have considered appropriate, and my mother still does. Neither are here, for very different reasons. Please, come in. To me you look perfectly lovely.’

‘It’s the servants’ opinions I’m more concerned about,’ Becky muttered. ‘I didn’t know I’d be living in a palace.’

‘Venice is a city of many palaces.’ Which was true, but hardly the point, Becky was clearly thinking, though she refrained from saying so. As the cork popped from the bottle with a sigh, Luca set it down, torn. The Procurer’s terms forbade him from asking any questions. Cursing her strict rules of engagement, he poured two crystal flutes of the cold sparkling wine and held one out to Becky. ‘Prosecco,’ he said. ‘Our Italian version of champagne. Personally, I consider it to be superior. *Salute*,’ he added, clinking glasses. ‘Here is to your arrival in Venice.’

‘*Salute*,’ Becky repeated in a perfect imitation of his Venetian accent, taking a cautious sip, screwing up her face in surprise as the bubbles burst on her tongue.

‘You’ve never tasted champagne, I take it?’ Luca asked.

‘No.’ She took another sip. ‘But I like this. Have you told the

servants that I am your cousin?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘What were you going to tell them if you’d decided I wouldn’t suit?’

Luca grimaced. ‘I have no idea, I preferred not to consider such an outcome. A sudden family illness back in England forcing you to return, I suppose. But you do suit, so fortunately I don’t have to tell them anything.’

‘Except maybe explain why the cousin of one of the richest families in Venice has the wardrobe of one of the poorest families in England.’

She tilted her chin at him, there was a flash of defiance in her eyes, yet he was certain now that she was embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry,’ Luca said. ‘I simply didn’t think. It is easily remedied. *Mia madre*, my mother, she will arrange it.’ He shook his head as Becky made to protest. ‘We will say that your luggage was lost in transit, or that your parents wished you to be attired on the Continent, since it is well known,’ he added with a sly smile, ‘that the English know nothing of couture.’

‘Yes, but, Luca, I don’t have any money.’

‘Luckily, I have an surfeit of it. Think of the outfits as your stage costumes. Therefore the expense is my responsibility.’

‘Yes, that makes sense,’ Becky said, looking extremely relieved. ‘Though I don’t imagine your mother will be very pleased to hear—Luca, does she *know* why I’m here?’

‘Si.’

‘And what does she think of your plan to avenge your father’s—my goodness, her husband’s death?’

‘She understands that it is a matter of honour, why it is so important to me to see some sort of justice served. It is the least I can do for him.’

All of which was true. It should have been sufficient, but Becky was not fooled. ‘You mean she understands but doesn’t necessarily agree?’

Shrewd, that was the English word to describe Becky Wickes. Or one of them. An admirable quality in a card sharp, but they weren’t playing cards, and Luca was not accustomed to having his motives questioned. In fact he wasn’t accustomed to being questioned about anything. ‘My mother’s opinion should not concern you, since she is not the one paying your fee.’ He regretted it immediately, as Becky’s expression stiffened.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...’

‘No, you were right to remind me that it’s none of my business.’

She took her time finishing her Prosecco and setting the glass back down on the silver tray before making for one of the bookcases, running her finger over Italian titles which she couldn’t possibly understand. Irrked by his own arrogance, Luca poured them both another glass of Prosecco and joined her. ‘I’m afraid I don’t react particularly well to being questioned,’ he said. ‘But I am capable of admitting to being wrong.’

She took the glass he offered her, touching it to his before taking a sip. ‘Not that it happens often, I imagine.’

He laughed reluctantly. 'More often than I'd like. I have always been—headstrong? I think that is the word. Acting before thinking, you know?'

'Not a wise move in my game.'

What was her game, precisely? Where had she come from? What had she left behind? He longed to ask. He hadn't thought that the terms of their contract would be so constraining. He hadn't expected to be so curious. But perhaps if he was a little more honest with her, she would come to trust him. 'My mother does not approve of my plans,' Luca said, 'you were right about that. My father's death was such a terrible shock, she wants to draw a line under the whole ghastly business.'

'When did it happen?'

'In April this year. I was in Scotland, and did not make it back to Venice in time for the funeral.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'Grazie.'

'Was there an enquiry? If he had been murdered, there must have been—I don't know how the law works here. Do you have the equivalent of Bow Street Runners?'

'There was no enquiry, my father's death was deemed to be a tragic accident.' Luca drained his glass, glancing at the clock which was chiming the hour, and on cue Brunetti appeared to announce that dinner was served.

'We can discuss it in the morning, every detail, I promise you,' he said, offering Becky his arm, 'and then I'll introduce you to

my mother. She should be home by midday. For tonight, let's take the opportunity to get to know each other a little better.'

The major-domo led them in a stately procession to the room next door. The dining room was another huge chamber, grand to the point of being overwhelming, with a woodland scene painted on the ceiling. Becky made out strange beasts which were half-man and half-wolf or goat, with naked torsos, horned heads, leering down at her, drinking from flagons of wine or playing the pipes. It was enough to put anyone off their dinner, so she decided not to look again.

The table looked as if it could accommodate at least thirty diners. Two places were set at the far end of the polished expanse of mahogany. Torn between awe and amusement, Becky knew enough to allow Luca to help her into her seat, but one look at the array of silverware and glasses in front of her wiped the smile from her face. She watched with growing dismay as Luca sipped and swirled the wine presented to him before his nod of approval prompted the major-domo to fill her glass. Two servants arrived, carrying a silver platter between them. She presumed the major-domo was reciting the contents of the platter. Completely intimidated, Becky simply stared, first at the platter, where she recognised not a single dish, then at the major-domo and then finally at Luca.

Whatever it was he'd noted in her expression, he rapped out a command to the servants. The platter was placed on the table. The major-domo and his consorts trod haughtily out, and Becky

heaved a huge sigh of relief. ‘What did you tell them?’

‘That my English cousin is quite ignorant of our splendid Venetian cuisine, and so I would take it upon myself to make a selection for you. Thus educating your vastly inferior English palate.’

‘Thank you.’ She was blushing, she could feel the heat spreading up her throat to her cheeks, but there was no point in pretending, it was far too important that she learn while she could. ‘You’ll need to educate my poor English manners as well as my palate I’m afraid,’ Becky said, keeping her eyes on the delicate porcelain plate in front of her. ‘I not only have no idea what’s on that platter, but I couldn’t hazard a guess at what implement I’m supposed to use to eat it.’

‘It is the same for all the English who visit Italy you know,’ Luca said, getting to his feet. ‘Our food, it confuses them. It will be my pleasure to introduce you to it.’

He was being kind, Becky knew that, but she was grateful for it all the same, and extremely grateful that he’d dismissed all the witnesses to her ignorance. As he presented the platter to her, she managed a smile. ‘It does look lovely.’

‘But of course. The first step to enjoying food is to find it pleasing to the eye. Now, these are *carciofe alla romana*, which is to say braised artichokes prepared in the Roman style—because, just between us, though Venetian cooking is obviously far superior to anything served in England, in Italy, I regret to say that we Venetians are considered to be culinary peasants.’ He set

a strange off-white chunk of something that looked nothing like the big blowsy green artichokes they sold at the Covent Garden fruit market on her plate.

‘*Grazie*,’ Becky said dubiously.

‘Now, these are *ambretti all’olio e limone*, which is simply prawns and lemon. Would you like some?’

‘They smell delicious. Yes, please.’

‘*Ostriche alla tarantina*.’

‘Oysters. I recognise these, though I’ve never had them hot like this.’

‘You’ll like them. This is octopus. Try it. And these are *biancheti*.’

‘Whitebait,’ Becky exclaimed triumphantly after a brief study of the little fish. ‘I’ll have some of those too, please, unless—Am I supposed to try only one dish?’

‘No. This is *antipasti*, the whole point is to sample a little of everything.’ Luca sat back down, filling his own plate. ‘Use your fingers, then rinse them when you’re done. That’s what the bowl at the side of your plate is for, see, with the slice of lemon floating in it.’

‘Well, I’m glad you told me that or I might have drunk it, thinking it lemon soup!’

‘You mustn’t worry, Becky. People will expect you to be confused by our customs here. They’re very different.’

‘Were you the same, when you first went to England? When was that?’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Sorry, I forgot. No questions.’

‘I’m willing to waive that rule if you are.’

Becky examined the chunk of octopus on her plate, then popped it into her mouth. She’d expected it to be chewy, fishy, but it was neither, melting on her tongue, tasting of wine and lemon and parsley. Luca was waiting on an answer, but he could wait. She took a sip of wine. Also delicious. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of her humble background, but it was like night and day to all this. Would Luca think less of her for it? In one way it didn’t matter, since he’d already committed to her staying.

She picked up an oyster shell, tipping the contents into her mouth, giving a little sigh of pleasure as this too melted on her tongue, soft and sweet, nothing like the briny ones served from barrels back home. Yes, of course it mattered. They were going to be spending a lot of time together. She had warmed to Luca immediately and she wanted him to like her in return. She certainly didn’t want him looking down his aristocratic nose at her, but if she didn’t reveal a little of her humble origins, he wouldn’t know just how much help she was going to need to learn how to be convincing in her role as his cousin. If she had to learn, and make any number of mistakes in the process, she’d rather it was from him, in front of him, and not in public. *And* there was the fact that she wanted to know more about him too.

‘Go on, then,’ Becky said, ‘let’s agree to forget the rule for now. But you first. What took you to England?’

‘The Royal Navy,’ he said promptly. ‘When I was twelve, my father sent me as an ensign. When I resigned my commission

four years ago, I was a captain.’

‘I knew it!’ Becky exclaimed. ‘When I first set eyes on you, I thought you looked liked a pirate.’

‘I think the Admiralty might have something to say about that description,’ he answered, grinning, ‘though there were times when it was accurate enough.’

Becky pushed her empty plate to one side. ‘Have you been all over the world? I can picture you, leaping from deck to deck, cutlass in hand, confiscating chests of gold from the Spanish.’

‘You forgot to mention the parrot on my shoulder. And my peg leg.’

‘And the lovely wench, swooning in your arms because you rescued her from a rival pirate, who we know must be the evil one, because he’s wearing an eyepatch.’

Luca threw back his head and laughed. ‘You’ve watched too many plays.’

‘Not watched, but acted in them,’ Becky admitted, smiling at the surprise registered on his face. ‘And not any of the kind of roles you’re imagining either.’

‘What do you think I’m imagining?’

‘Breeches roles. Not that I wasn’t asked, and not that I bother about showing off my ankles or playing the man, but...’ Becky’s smile faded. ‘It’s the assumption associated with those particular roles that I resented. I haven’t been on the stage for—Oh, five years now. Since I was seventeen,’ she added, ‘in case you’re curious and too polite to ask my age.’

‘It’s not the thing in England,’ Luca agreed, ‘to discuss age or money. But you’ll find attitudes differ here in Venice.’

Brunetti, the major-domo, entered the dining room at this point, followed by his minions bearing more dishes, and Luca busied himself with serving her the next course. Risotto, he called it, rice with wild mushrooms, to be eaten with a spoon. It was creamy but not sweet, and though it looked like a pudding it tasted nothing like.

‘I think you might be right about Italian cooking, compared to English,’ Becky said. ‘Not that I’m exactly qualified to compare, mind you. I’ve never had a dinner like this. All this food just for two people, it seems an awful lot. We didn’t even finish the— What did you call it?’

‘Antipasti. It will doubtless be finished in the kitchen. Palace staff eat better than most. What kind of food do you like to eat, Becky?’

‘Whatever I can lay my hands on, usually. Beggars can’t be choosers.’ She spoke flippantly. What she’d meant was, *I don’t want to talk about it*. Then she remembered that she’d agreed to talk, and that Luca had talked, and it was her turn. ‘I don’t have a kitchen, never mind a cook. I eat from pie shops. Whatever’s cheap at the market at the end of the day, bread—ordinary food, you know?’

He didn’t, she could see from his face. ‘But you seem... Not comfortable, but you don’t seem to be *uncomfortable* with all this,’ Luca said, waving his hand at the room, frowning.

‘Well, that’s a relief to know. The only time I’ve ever sat at a table anything like this was on the stage, where the food was made from plaster and cardboard. I’m a good actress. Luckily for me, The Procurer spotted that.’

‘She saw you onstage?’

Becky shook her head. ‘I told you, I’ve not been on the stage for five years, and The Procurer is...’ She bit her tongue, mortified. ‘Now, that is one subject I’m not at liberty to discuss.’

‘Then tell me instead, what you meant when you said that you resented the connotations of—What did you call them, breeches roles?’

‘That’s when a girl plays a boy on the stage.’ Becky studied him over her wine glass. ‘You know perfectly well what I meant. That a girl who flaunts her legs on the stage is reckoned to be willing to open them offstage,’ she said bluntly. ‘It’s what draws most denizens of the pit, with good reason in many cases. But I wanted none of it, and it was easier to remove myself from harm’s way than to keep fending them off.’

‘Surely whoever was in charge—the theatre manager?—would have protected you.’

Becky laughed harshly. ‘Then he would have needed to protect me from himself. He was the worst of the lot. A perk of the job is how he viewed it,’ she said sardonically. ‘Play nice, you get the best parts. Refuse to let him paw you with his grubby little hands, the work dries up. I decided to take the decision out of his hands by quitting. There are many actresses who are happy to exploit

their good looks to their advantage, and good luck to them, but I, for one, refused to. They are the ones being exploited, in my view.'

She was surprised to see that Luca seemed genuinely shocked. 'Which makes you rather remarkable, I think,' he said. 'Was there no one else to look out for you?'

'I was seventeen, hardly a child. You grow up quickly, in that game. If you mean my parents, I never knew my father. As for my mother, she was an actress herself. She lived long enough to put me on the stage alongside her. I was six, maybe seven when she died.' Becky finished her risotto and drained her wine glass, and decided to put an end to this conversation too. She wasn't used to talking about herself. 'I never went to school, but I didn't need to, not with the stage to educate me. Reading. Writing. Manners. Plays of all sorts, from bawdy nonsense to Shakespeare, who can be quite bawdy himself. Anyway, that's quite enough about me for now. I'm much more interested in hearing about you and your life on the ocean wave.'

To her relief, Luca obliged. He was a natural storyteller, transporting her from the dreary dockyards of Plymouth and the grey seas of England, to the azure blue of the Mediterranean, the sultry sun of Egypt, the mayhem of Lisbon and the vast expanse of the New World. There were naval battles, but he glossed over those in a way that she could see disguised pain, suffering, the darker side of human nature. And though he made little of his own role in war at sea, it was clear enough it had been a significant

one, that he was not one of those officers who hid behind his men.

‘And then, when Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, it was obvious that there would be no more wars, and therefore no need for a vast naval fleet. The prospect of sitting behind a desk in the Admiralty filled me with dread,’ Luca said, ‘and so I resigned my commission. Yes,’ he added over his shoulder to his majordomo, who had appeared once more, ‘we’re quite finished.’

Becky looked down at her empty plate. There were fish bones. She hardly recalled being served any fish. Her wine glass was half-full of red, not white. How long had Luca been talking, answering her eager questions? But she wasn’t nearly satisfied. ‘Why the navy though? And why the English navy?’

‘British. Because Venice no longer possesses one. Because I would never countenance serving our usurpers any more than my father would have, whether French or Austrian. Because my mother’s family have a proud seafaring tradition. Admirals, and pirates too,’ Luca said with a wicked smile.

Shaking her head at the offer of coffee, Becky sat back in her seat with a contented sigh. She’d eaten so much she was sleepy. ‘What have you been doing for the last years, then?’

‘Learning how to build ships, not sail them,’ Luca retorted. ‘I spent some time in Glasgow. The Scots are even better ship makers than we Venetians used to be, though it pains me to say it. My father, to my surprise, heartily endorsed my desire to become a shipwright.’

‘But why? Noble families like yours don’t tend to dirty their hands by becoming involved in trade.’

‘We are Venetians,’ Luca said. ‘We invented trade.’

Becky bit back a smile. He puffed up with pride whenever he mentioned his beloved Venice. ‘I’m surprised you ever left the city if you love it so much.’

‘We once had a great navy. Our merchant ships travelled the world. But all that was lost as other seafaring nations supplanted us. Venice’s reputation these days is based on its notoriety for vice and excess, a city devoted to pleasure. Always, when people talk of her, it is Carnival and nothing else. It is because I am determined to contribute somehow to making this city great again that I left her.’

‘But how? Aren’t you—Don’t the Austrians rule here?’

His mouth tightened. ‘For now. Building new ships to re-establish trading routes. That is my dream. Though for the moment, I keep it to myself.’ Luca put a finger to his mouth, making a show of peering over his shoulder. ‘There is one thing you must never forget about Venice,’ he said in a stage whisper. ‘There are spies everywhere.’

‘I hope you don’t ever plan to tread the boards. You’re a terrible actor.’

But Luca’s expression became serious. ‘I mean it. Within these walls it is safe to speak your mind, but in public you must keep your counsel. Intrigue is a way of life and Venice can be a dangerous city for the unwary.’

‘How can somewhere so beautiful be so menacing?’

‘Because Venice is a city of contrasts. Light and shadow. Beauty and decay. Stone and water.’

‘You make it sound fascinating. I look forward to exploring it.’

‘It will be my pleasure to be your guide.’

He smiled at her, and she forgot what she was about to say. Sightseeing, she reminded herself, that was what they were talking about, but her eyes were locked on his, and all she could do was stare, mesmerised. She wondered what it would feel like to be kissed by him, and he must have read her thoughts, because there was a gleam in his eyes that made her think he wanted to kiss her too.

The table was in the way, but she was on her feet now, and so was he. He had closed the gap between them. She was lifting her face to his. And then he muttered something, shook his head, stepped back, and at the same time she regained her senses and moved away.

‘In the morning, after breakfast,’ Luca said, his voice gruff, ‘we will draw up a plan of action.’

‘In the morning,’ Becky repeated, trying to regulate her breathing, ‘I will assume the role of your demure cousin Rebecca.’

He looked as relieved as she felt. She wondered if he was thinking the same as her, that it was for the best, since cousins couldn’t kiss.

‘But in the meantime, you must be tired,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she agreed gratefully. ‘Very tired. I will bid you goodnight.’

He took her hand, bowing over it with a mocking little smile, pressing the lightest of kisses to her fingertips. ‘*Buona notte, Becky.*’

‘Goodnight?’ A slight nod, and she repeated the words, enjoying the soft, sensual sound of them. ‘*Buona notte, Luca.*’

Chapter Three

Becky woke with a start. Completely disoriented by the comforting, heavy weight of the bedclothes, the softness of the mattress, the serene silence, it took her a moment to realise she wasn't in her cramped garret in the rookeries. The room was cool, but nothing like the bone-chilling cold of a London winter morning. There was an ember still smouldering in the fireplace that would take only a moment to relight. Picking up some kindling from the basket on the hearth, it occurred to her that this would be the maid's task, so she put it back.

A narrow shaft of light slanted through the gap in the curtains, but it was enough to allow her to get to the window from the fireplace without bumping into any of the clutter of chairs and occasional tables that littered the room. Gazing out, the canal was shrouded in a blanket of silvery-grey mist. She caught her breath at the sheer beauty of the scene, leaning over the little Juliet balcony to get a better view of the rows of gondolas bobbing gently on the canal banks, to breathe in the salty air, to drink in the utter stillness of the scene, like a painting or a world where she was the only person alive.

Nothing had prepared her for this. In London, no matter the time of day, there was noise, there were people, there was constant bustle. London was a city painted in shades of grey most of the time, the air tasting of the smoke which formed a grimy

hem around the cleanest of petticoats. In London, the sky didn't change colour dramatically like this, clearing and lightening to the palest of blue as the sun rose. The fast-running Thames was a muddy brown colour. Before her eyes, the Grand Canal was becoming bluer and bluer, the sunlight painting bright strips of gold on top of the turquoise. It was magical, there was no other word for it.

She watched, fascinated, as the canal came to life, the first gondolas with a lantern in the prow cutting elegantly through the waters, the oar of the gondoliers barely stirring the surface. Only when a man appeared on a balcony opposite hers and blew an extravagant kiss did she recall that she was wearing a nightgown, that her hair was down, that she was displaying herself on the balcony of the Palazzo Pietro like—Well, not like Luca's demure English relative.

Closing the windows, but leaving the curtains drawn back, Becky retreated back into the warm, luxurious nest of her four-poster bed. She had no idea whether she should ring for the maid. No idea whether breakfast would be brought to her, or whether she should seek it out. Reality, long overdue, came crashing down on her. She truly was in another world, one in which she felt completely and utterly out of her depth. Yet she had to convince everyone, from the army of staff at the *palazzo*, to everyone in 'society', whatever Luca meant by that, that she was Cousin Rebecca, born and bred to all this.

Flopping back on to the pillows, Becky tried to calm the rising

tide of panic welling up inside her. She'd been on the stage almost before she could walk, and she was an accomplished actress. Cousin Rebecca was just another role she had to play. She could master it if she worked hard enough. So what, if she was living in a palace and not just acting in front of a painted backdrop, acting was acting, wasn't it? And if she thought about it, which she had better do right now, wasn't confidence the key to her success with her card tricks? People only see what they want to see. She'd said something of the sort to The Procurer, and it was true. There was no reason, none at all, why the servants here would look at her and see a card sharp or even just a common Londoner.

She wasn't common; she was extraordinary. Luca had said so. Of course, she wasn't really, it was just that he'd never met anyone like her. She wasn't extraordinary, she was simply different, beyond his ken, as he was beyond hers. It would certainly explain the most unexpected end to the evening last night. Becky burrowed deeper under the covers, pulling the sheet over her burning face. What on earth had possessed her! Her only consolation was that Luca had seemed to be as shocked as she was by that inexplicable almost kiss. He could easily have taken advantage. She would not have resisted him, she was ashamed to admit. Thank heavens the pair of them had come to their senses in time. It must be that strangeness which drew them, two opposites attracted to each other like magnets. She'd simply have to work harder to resist, because the very last thing she wanted was to get burnt again.

Pushing back the bedcovers, Becky sat up to face the cold light of day. She'd learnt a bitter lesson with Jack. She'd given her sappy heart to Jack. Looking back, she couldn't believe she'd been so gullible. All these years fending for herself, and she'd not once been tempted by any of the offers that came her way—though they'd been of the crude sort, and hardly tempting, she was forced to admit. While Jack—well, Jack was a charmer. He didn't proposition her, he—yes, she could admit it, even if it made her toes curl—he had wooed her. Seduced her with compliments and promises, gradually taking more and more advantage as she fell for his weasel words and his false declarations of love. Only then, when she'd handed him her heart on a plate, did he start to use her for his own ends, so subtly she didn't notice until it was too late. It made her blood boil, thinking of the fiasco at Crockford's that might have resulted in the loss of her liberty, if not her life. There was a moment, when it was all tumbling down like a house of cards, when she'd turned to Jack, pleading with her eyes for him to rescue her. Instead of which, he'd turned his back on her and fled to save his own skin. Only then did she realise that it had all been a tissue of lies. Even now, thinking about it left a bitter taste in her mouth. What an idiot she'd been.

But look where it had brought her. Becky propped herself up on the mountain of pillows. If Jack could see her now! She tried to imagine his expression if he walked into the room to see her lying like a princess in this huge bed, but she couldn't. She didn't

actually want to picture Jack here at all. In fact the very notion of him being in her bedchamber, seeing her in her nightgown, made her feel queasy, even though he'd seen her in her nightgown numerous times, and had been in her bed any number of times too. But she didn't want to remember that either. Or his kisses, which she must have enjoyed at the time, though the idea of them now... Becky screwed up her face in distaste.

Luca now, she could happily imagine Luca standing here at the side of her bed, gazing down at her in that smouldering way of his. So very different from Jack in every way, Luca was. Kissing Luca would be like walking one of those tightropes acrobats used in the piazza at Covent Garden. Dangerous and exciting at the same time. Thrilling, that was what Luca's kisses would be, because he really was from a different world. A world of luxury and sinful decadence, like the food she'd eaten, the silk sheets she was lying on, the paintings hanging on the walls and the dreamlike city outside her window. A world to be savoured, relished, as long as she remembered it could never be her world.

Outside in the corridor, she could hear the sound of servants going about their business. It was time for her to concentrate on hers. She had to transform herself into the Queen of Coins. She was to play the demure cousin. She was to make a man a pauper to avenge the death of Luca's father. She didn't know how he died or why, or if it really was murder in the first place. There were a great many questions needing answers before she could fully understand her various roles. If Luca's father had been

murdered, Luca was entitled to justice, wasn't he? She'd be doing a good deed by helping him, and in the process helping herself by earning a substantial fee. With renewed determination, Becky slithered down from the bed and began to get dressed before the maid arrived with unwanted offers of help.

After breakfast they had retired to what Luca called the small parlour, and though to Becky it looked like a very large one, it could, she supposed, be described as small compared to the drawing room, measuring only about a quarter of the acreage. The chamber was situated at the back of the *palazzo* with a view out to a smaller, narrower canal. The walls were ruby red, and the ceiling fresco relatively plain, with just a few romping cupids and a smattering of clouds. The fire burning beneath the huge white marble mantelpiece, the well-cushioned sofa and chairs drawn up beside the hearth, the pot of coffee on the little table between the chairs where she and Luca sat facing one another, gave the room an illusion of cosiness—for a palace, that was.

He poured two cups of coffee. It was very strong, black and sugarless, almost chewy compared to the drink she was used to, and Becky wasn't at all sure that she liked it. Luca, on the other hand, clearly relished the stuff, draining his cup in one gulp. 'Carnival begins in earnest soon, and we have a great deal to do in preparation for it. But before we get down to business, I would like to sincerely apologise for my behaviour last night.'

'Oh, please, there is no need...'

'There is every need. I did not even think to ask if you were

married, though I assumed you were not, else you would have mentioned it.’

‘And quite rightly too!’ Becky said indignantly. ‘What kind of wife would I be, to have encouraged you to—Not that I did kiss you, but...’

‘You did not encourage me,’ Luca interrupted, mercifully cutting her short. ‘I don’t know what possessed me.’

‘No more do I,’ Becky replied, her cheeks flaming. ‘Fortunately we both came to our senses. Despite appearances, I’m not that sort of woman.’

‘That much was obvious given what you told me last night. You left what I am sure could have been a very lucrative career on the stage precisely because you are not that sort of woman. I am extremely sorry if I gave you the impression that I am that sort of man however.’ Luca pushed his hair back from his brow, looking deeply uncomfortable. ‘You would be forgiven for thinking that I am just like all those others, seeking to take advantage of an innocent...’

‘But you didn’t, did you? Take advantage, I mean? And you could have,’ Becky said painfully. ‘The truth is, if you’d kissed me I doubt I’d have stopped you. But you didn’t. You’re not a bit like them. It didn’t even occur to me to compare you to the likes of them.’

‘Grazie.’

She was touched. He’d clearly been agonising over something that was just as much her fault as his. ‘I’m not an innocent, Luca,’

Beky said. 'I'm not what you might call a loose woman, far from it, but I'm not a Cousin Rebecca either. I knew what I was doing.'

'That is more than I did.'

She laughed, strangely relieved by this admission. 'Shall we forget it ever happened?'

'Easier said than done.'

'Then why don't we concentrate on the job in hand?'

His expression became immediately serious. 'You are right. I will begin, if I may, with a short history lesson, for our city plays a pivotal role in the story. Venice, you see, was once a great city, one of the world's oldest Republics, and one of the most beautiful. Her treasures were beyond compare.'

He began to pace the room, his hands in the pockets of his breeches, a deep frown drawing his brows together. 'My family have always wielded power here. My father, Conte Guido del Pietro, along with his oldest friend, Don Massimo Sarti, were two of the most respected government officials in 1797 when our city surrendered to Napoleon and the Republic fell. Within a year, Napoleon sold Venice to Austria, but before he left, he ordered the city stripped of every asset. Our treasures, statues, paintings, papers, were torn down, packed away and shipped off to France. It was looting on an unprecedented scale.'

Luca dropped back into his chair, stretching his legs out in front of him. 'But they did not steal everything. My father and Don Sarti acted swiftly to preserve some of our city's heritage. Not the most famous works, that would have drawn unwelcome

attention, but some of the oldest, most valuable, most sacred. And papers. The history of our city. All of these, they managed to spirit away before the French even knew they existed, to a hiding place only they knew of. It was a tremendous risk for them to take in order to preserve our city's heritage. In the eyes of our oppressors, their actions would be deemed treasonable, and the penalty for treason is death.'

'In England, the penalty for everything is death,' Becky said, curling her lip. 'Whether you steal a silk handkerchief or plot to kill the King.' Or indeed cheat while unwittingly playing cards with one of the King's relatives.

'My father,' Luca said icily, 'did not commit treason. Quite the reverse. It was a noble act born of patriotism. He preserved what belonged to Venice for Venice.'

Becky was about to point out that, whatever his motives, he had stolen the artefacts, but thought better of it. The man, in his son's eyes at least, was obviously some sort of saint. 'What was he planning on doing with all this treasure,' she asked, 'presuming he didn't plan on keeping it buried for ever?'

'They thought, my father and Don Sarti, that the Republic would be quickly restored, at which point they would return the treasures to the city. Sadly, they were mistaken. France gave Venice to Austria. Austria handed Venice back to France. Now, thanks to Wellington, we have lasting peace in Europe, and it looks like Venice will remain as it is, in the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, part of the Austrian empire once more.

‘Bear with me, Becky,’ Luca added with a sympathetic smile, ‘I can see you are wondering what this has to do with your presence here. All is about to become clear. You see, earlier this year my father came to the conclusion that the political situation was now stable enough to negotiate with the authorities for the restoration of the treasures on a no-questions-asked basis.’

Becky frowned. ‘Wouldn’t that be risky? Since he had committed treason, according to the law, I mean. Not that I meant to imply...’

‘No, you are right,’ Luca agreed. ‘It was a risk, but one worth taking, my father believed. For those who rule Venice now, it would be a very popular move, to have a hand in restoring what everyone believed lost. But it had been more than twenty years since the treasure had been hidden. Before he broached the idea with the powers that be, my father visited the hiding place, thinking to make a full inventory, only to find it gone. Stolen by the only other person who knew of its existence,’ Luca said grimly. ‘Don Sarti, his co-conspirator and best friend!’

‘Good heavens! But why? If Don Sarti’s motives were as noble as your father’s...’

‘They were, in the beginning, but it seems Don Sarti is in thrall to something which supersedes all other loyalties. Cards.’ Luca dug his hands into the deep pockets of his coat, frowning up at the cupid-strewn ceiling. ‘When my father confronted him, he confessed to having sold a few pieces each year to play at the *ridotti*, the private gaming hells which operate only during

Carnival, hoping each time to recoup his losses.’

‘All gamblers believe their next big win is just a turn of the cards away,’ Becky said. ‘It is what keeps them coming back to the tables.’

‘I don’t understand it.’ Luca shook his head. ‘It is one thing to play with one’s own money, but to gamble the heritage of our city—Don Sarti knew he was committing a heinous crime. At first, my father thought that everything was lost, but Don Sarti told him he had only recently sold the bulk of the treasure on the black market with the intention of playing deep at the next Carnival, hoping to win double, treble his total losses. He swore it was his intention to gift his winnings back to the city.’

Luca cursed viciously under his breath. ‘*Mi scusi*, it is difficult for me to talk about this without becoming enraged. The perfidy of the man! To attempt to *justify* his behaviour, to think that he could atone for the loss of irreplaceable artefacts. My father could not believe he had fallen so low.’

‘I think,’ Becky said tentatively, ‘that he probably believed what he said. I’ve come across men like Don Sarti. It is a madness that grips them. They will beg, steal or borrow to ensure another turn of the cards, another roll of the dice. As long as they have a stake, they will play.’ She had always tried to avoid playing against such pathetic creatures. The memory of her time at the tables in the hells was shameful, tinged as it was with the memory of how she had been persuaded to play there in the first place, but that experience was precisely what Luca was paying for. ‘I

presume,' she said to him, 'that Don Sarti refused to surrender the money into your father's keeping?'

'You presume correctly. My father informed him in no uncertain terms that he would do everything in his power to stop him, going so far as to say that he would make public the story of what they had done, risking his own freedom and his reputation, if Don Sarti did not hand over his ill-gotten gains. The treasure was gone, but what money was left belonged to Venice. Whether or not he would have carried out his threat I will never know, for Don Sarti decided not to take the risk.'

'That was why he had him killed?' Becky whispered, appalled. 'Oh, Luca, that's dreadful.'

'*Si.*' He was pale, his eyes dark with pain, his hands clenched so tightly into fists that his knuckles were white. 'Fortunately for me, unfortunately for Don Sarti, my father wrote to me in desperation as soon as he returned home from that fateful interview, urging me to return to Venice as soon as possible.'

'So that's how you know!' Becky exclaimed, 'I did wonder...'

'But no. I didn't receive the letter. Instead, as I told you yesterday, the summons which reached me was from my mother, informing me that my father had died. He had been dead almost two months by the time I arrived in Venice, in June. As far as I knew, my father had drowned, slipping on the steps of the *palazzo* in the early hours. He was the worse for wine, so the gondolier claimed, and there was a thick fog when it happened. Though the alarm was raised, help arrived too late to save him.

When his body was finally pulled from the canal, he had been dead for some hours.'

'How tragic,' Becky said, aware of the inadequacy of her words.

Luca nodded grimly. 'The summons my father sent finally reached me here in July, having followed in my wake from Venice to London to Plymouth to Glasgow and back. You can imagine how guilty I felt, knowing that I had arrived far too late. He had never asked me for help before, and I had failed him.'

Becky swallowed a lump in her throat. 'But even if you had received the letter telling you of Don Sarti's treachery...'

'Ah, no, that letter contained no details, save to bid my urgent return. My father would not risk his post being intercepted. I was not exaggerating when I said there are spies everywhere. No, there was but one clue in that letter. My father said that he had acquired a new history of the Royal Navy, and looked forward to my thoughts on the volume. It was there, in that book in the library, that he had placed the papers relating the whole sorry affair, exactly as I have told you.'

'What about your mother?'

'She knew nothing, until I showed her the letter. She was almost as shocked as I. My father had been preoccupied in the weeks before he died, a delicate matter of city business, he told her, but nothing more. She didn't even know he had summoned me home.'

Luca wandered over to the window, to gaze out at the narrow

canal. Becky joined him. The houses opposite looked almost close enough to touch. 'It's a big leap,' she said, 'from learning that your father's been betrayed by his best friend, to assuming the best friend has had him killed.'

'It was only when I questioned the palace gondoliers and discovered that both of them had been suddenly taken ill that day, forcing my father to use a hired gondola, that I began to question events. I can find no trace of the gondolier described by Brunetti. And then there was the timing. It was, according to my major-domo, almost three in the morning when the gondolier roused the *palazzo* to tell them my father had fallen in, yet my father left the *palazzo* where he had been dining with friends at just after eleven.'

'So you think that the gondolier waited to make certain that he was drowned?'

'I don't think he was one of our Venetian gondoliers at all. They are a tight-knit group of men, Becky. Hard-working and honest. If this man who brought my father back had been one of them, they would have known who he was.'

'You think he was actually an assassin hired by Don Sarti and sent to silence your father?'

'My father had threatened to expose him. Don Sarti would have been desperate to avoid that at all costs. Taking account of all the circumstances, I think it is almost certain, don't you?'

'Yes, I'm afraid I do. Is there no way you can bring him to justice?'

‘If by that you mean getting the authorities involved, then no. I have no tangible proof of murder, and the only evidence that the treasure was hidden is my father’s letter which, if it was made public, would destroy his reputation. I have no option but to find some other way to hold Don Sarti to account. If my father had been less honourable, if he had not tried to prevent Don Sarti from losing everything they had tried to protect, then he would still be alive today.’ Luca took a shuddering breath. ‘If I had received that letter in time, perhaps he would be alive still.’

‘You can’t think that way,’ Becky said fervently. ‘Even if you had received the letter earlier, you still wouldn’t have returned to Venice in time to prevent your father’s murder, would you?’ Which was no doubt true, but for Luca, she understood, quite irrelevant. He would continue to torture himself with guilt until he had found a way to atone. Finally, she understood his plan. ‘You can’t bring him back,’ she said, ‘but you can prevent Don Sarti squandering Venice’s money, just as your father wished, is that it? You want me to win it back?’

‘Yes.’ Luca let out a long, heartfelt sigh. ‘That is my plan exactly. I want to reclaim the money for my city, and I want to see Don Sarti destroyed in the process. I want to use his vice against him. We will turn the tables on him, quite literally. We will indulge this passion of his until he has returned everything he took from the city. I have to do this, Becky. *Per amor del cielo*, I have no choice. Until it is done, my life is not my own.’

That too she could see, in the haunted look in his eyes. ‘How

much do I have to win?’ Becky asked, knowing already that she didn’t want to hear the answer.

‘I don’t know for sure, but I can tell you what my father estimated.’

He did, and the sum he named made her blanch. ‘It sounds like a king’s ransom.’

‘A city’s ransom. It is a dangerous game we will play. If the stakes are too high for you, you can, as The Procurer said, return to England.’

And face the threat of the gallows? Not likely, Becky thought. ‘We have a saying back home, as well to be hung for a sheep as a lamb. One—what do you call it?—*scudo*, or a thousand or a million, I don’t suppose it’ll make any difference, it’s all the same to me. It’s not my money I’ll be staking, and as for the winnings—what are you planning to do with your winnings, Luca, assuming you’re not going to litter the streets of Venice with gold for people to pick up?’

‘I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Does this mean that I can rely on you?’

She knew she should consider more carefully, but what was the point! Luca desperately needed help for a very good cause. She desperately wanted to earn that fee, her ticket to freedom from a life of trickery, and to dodge the noose. It was risky, extremely risky, but there were always ways of managing risk, always ways of making fortune work in your favour. ‘If there’s a way to pull it off, I’ll find it,’ she said, ‘but you need to understand one golden

rule about gambling. Even when the deck is stacked, there are no guarantees.'

'I think I would trust you less if you tried to pretend otherwise.' He kissed her hand. 'You come to me under tragic circumstances, but you are a beacon of light at the end of a very dark tunnel.' He pressed another kiss to her fingertips before releasing her. 'I don't know about you, but I am in dire need of some refreshment before we continue. My mother will be home soon, and we still have a great deal to discuss.'

Luca's idea of refreshment was more strong black coffee. It arrived so promptly when he rang the bell that Becky thought they must have an endless supply on tap in the kitchen. Just a few sips, and she felt her heart begin to race.

'Would you prefer tea?' he asked, already on to his second cup as she set hers aside.

'No, thank you. This stuff might be mother's milk to you, but if I have any more I'll have palpitations.'

'Mother's milk, that is what they call gin in London, isn't it?'

'You're thinking of mother's ruin. And that's not my cup of tea either. Shall we continue?'

He nodded. 'I have been thinking,' he said, looking decidedly uncomfortable, 'about your role as Cousin Rebecca. If you are to play it convincingly, it is not only a matter of wearing the right clothes.'

'You mean manners and etiquette? How to behave in polite society. I know I need some help, but I'm a quick learner, I

promise.’

‘Then you won’t be offended if I ask my mother to give you some pointers?’

‘I would be delighted,’ Becky said, heartily relieved. ‘I would have asked you myself, only I didn’t want you to think I’m not up to the role. Are you sure she’ll be willing to help me?’

‘Certainly, because by helping you she’ll be helping me.’

‘She won’t be used to mingling with the likes of me.’

Luca smiled faintly. ‘I’ve never met the likes of you. I find you a very intriguing mixture, Miss Becky Wickes.’

It didn’t sound at all like a compliment, so it was silly of her to be blushing like a school chit. ‘You make me sound like a cake batter.’

He laughed. ‘My mother will like you, I am sure of it.’

Since it wasn’t in her interests to contradict him, Becky decided to hold her tongue. ‘It’s not just a matter of how I behave when I’m Cousin Rebecca though,’ she said. ‘It’s about...’

‘The cards,’ Luca said, pre-empting her.

‘Well, yes.’

‘We use different packs here, and we play different games, if that’s what you were going to ask.’

‘I was.’

‘I can teach you. I’m not an expert, I’ll have to rely on you to determine how to—to...’

‘Cheat. You might as well call a spade a spade, if you’ll forgive the terrible pun. That’s my particular field of expertise. But

there's more to it than that. This Carnival...'

'There is nothing like it. It is exciting, it is dangerous, it is a time of intrigue and of decadence. The whole city takes part. You don't know if you are dancing with a countess or a laundry maid, or even,' Luca said with a wicked smile, 'a man or a woman.'

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