

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

MY
Carmina

REESE GABRIEL

MY CARINA

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MY CARINA

Reese Gabriel

Chapter One

Regan flipped desperately through the pages of her English-Italian dictionary. The small, balding railway agent had been firing off like a machine gun for five minutes straight and for the life of her she still could not figure out why he wouldn't sell her an ordinary second-class ticket on the eleven-forty to Venice.

"Primera clase solamente." Behind the small, square opening in the carved wooden façade the man wrung his pudgy hands.

Regan shook her head, as stubborn on occasions like this as was her father, a retired Philadelphia cop. *"No desiderio primera clase,"* she countered his concluded harangue. *"Desiderio seconda clase."*

The agent rolled his eyes toward heaven, muttering lamentations fit for an opera. For the grief she appeared to be giving him, Regan felt she might as well have excised his heart with a butter knife and served it to him without so much as a garnish or a glass of water.

"No desiderio primera clase," she held her ground. *"Desiderio—"*

"There isn't any second-class on the train to Venice," interrupted a voice behind her, smooth and deeply masculine. *"It's a rapido—an express. Only first-class cars."*

Regan felt that prickling on the back of her neck, the one she got whenever someone was too close to her business. That was something else she got from her dad. *"Excuse me—"* she whirled about, primed for a fight. *"But I don't believe I asked—"*

The man's beauty left her openmouthed, the words cut off in the back of her throat. He was like some kind of calendar come to life, a magazine cover, or a movie star fallen from heaven just for her. His looks were classic—deep, azure eyes, like the chalky Italian skies or the rippling Mediterranean. Jet-black hair, short and wavy. A noble Roman nose fit for the son of a Caesar. And his lips—full and red, firm and manly. Tiny

lines on either side of that mouth promised rich, intelligent laughter, or, if the occasion warranted, deep and righteous fury.

This was a man who made no apology for his sex, as did many in the world today, but who also seemed comfortable taking many roles. There was playfulness in those eyes, even as the firmness of his jaw and chin promised that there were boundaries none would dare cross.

"You didn't ask," he concurred, his accent a lyrical mix of Italian and English. "But it seemed to me if I didn't intervene, I'd never be able to purchase a ticket myself."

She flushed red. He'd managed, in a quite lighthearted manner to point out that she had in fact required the intervention of a bilingual speaker.

"Yes, well, thank you for that," she said hastily seeking the refuge of her oversized purse as she searched for the proper amount of Euros.

"*Grazie.*" She snatched back the change, not bothering to count it.

For some reason having the man behind her, with his worn jeans, light blue T-shirt and stylish leather jacket, was making her singularly uncomfortable—in a pulse-quickenning, nipple-tightening kind of way. Not wanting to make eye contact, she attempted a quick dart to his right-hand side. Klutz that she was, she managed a direct hit. Her own bare arm against his sturdy, leather-jacketed shoulder.

Naturally her purse upended, the entirety of its contents spilling on the marble floor of Rome's central station. *Oh, the curse of being a woman*, she thought to herself.

The young Roman god, unfortunately for her modesty, proved himself a gentleman. Squatting down—filling out his denims most enticingly in the process—he began reaching for as many of her lost items as he could retrieve. Lipstick, chewing gum, sewing kit, ballpoint pen, a set of postcards, a rain bonnet, a tiny souvenir model of the Coliseum for her nephew, and a tampon.

And then there was the book, bright and lurid, totally advertising its kinkiness. *Fuck*. She'd forgotten it was there.

"Give me that." She snatched it back, the brief contact of their fingers sending a small electric charge down her spine.

Had he seen the title? The lurid cover? No matter, he was about to become ancient history. Like the Eternal City herself. If she could survive the next few minutes, that is. Trapped on her knees before him, each second a painful agony, blood pounding in her head, she threw the rest of her things back into the colorful canvas bag and took off for the train platforms. The infamous express, which had caused all the trouble in the first place, was already waiting. Regan entered the nearest car, virtually diving into the first free compartment she could find.

Not 'til the train started moving did she begin breathing normally again. Just for fun she had a go at ranking this little incident against various other mortifying experiences in her life. Up to now, tripping over Jimmy Joe Lewis' foot at her sophomore homecoming dance and ending up headfirst in a bowl of punch had ranked number one, with number two being the time she mistook that surrealist ear sculpture she was selling at her art gallery for quite a different part of the female anatomy.

Either of these sure seemed hard to beat, but she had to consider the full picture of what she'd just accomplished. First, she'd made an ass of herself in two languages in front of hundreds of Italian railway commuters. Then she'd managed to act like a complete fool in front of a handsome stranger. And to top it off, she'd nearly tackled the man.

And let's not forget luring him into a game of fifty-two pick-up with your most intimate female items, not least of which was a racy Italian bondage and domination book whose title was Prisoner of Sex.

Most of the contents, lacking any translation guide, eluded her. It was the cover that got to her. It depicted a young woman with long, dark hair, her wrists tied together, stripped to her panties, and draped helplessly across the lap of a tall, muscular man, shirtless with large hands. Her naked breasts pressed against his legs as he held her down, his palm on her bare back. His second palm was in midair, ready to spank her.

She was looking over her shoulder, trying to see what he was going to do to her. The anticipation was exquisite. She had only her panties, sheer and white, to protect her from his wrath. Beneath his tight leather pants, the outline of his hard cock was more than a little obvious.

It was the expression on the woman's face that intrigued Regan the most, though. The way she seemed so very...eager. But it was more complicated than that. There was this sweet dread on her face, a weakness she could see in the jaw, the opened mouth. Regan identified with it at once, and in the most intimate way possible. One look at that picture in the bookstore, and she'd been wet and ready for love.

She'd purchased the book, and had run straight back to her hotel room to masturbate. Her tourist's dictionary was little help in translating the good parts, but the cover itself had given enough fodder for her imagination. Over and over, she'd stroked herself to mind-blowing climax, twisting in her sheets, soaking them in sweat, her soft moans drowned out by the busy ebb and flow of the Roman traffic outside her small, shuttered room. It was something she would never have dared to do back in Manhattan. She wasn't sure why. It just wouldn't have felt right. Somehow here, on vacation in this famous country of *amore*, it was different.

Her dreams of bondage and of serving as a man's love slave were deep and personal. Too intimate to ever be shared even with her various boyfriends over the years. And yet, she'd managed to spill the beans to a total stranger. A man so potently alive with sexual possibility that it had taken every ounce of strength to keep from swooning at his feet at the very first sight of him.

And then there was his touch, fingers grazing hers as they picked up her things. She could sense his heartbeat. And other things, too. Passion, desire, and pain, etched deep into his soul.

But that wasn't possible, was it? To read so much into a man she knew nothing about—not even his name? She'd been in Europe too long, that was it. Thank goodness she'd only booked herself for ten days and not for the month Karma and Rique had

wanted her to take off. Some people just weren't meant to take vacations, and Regan O'Connell was one of them.

Just two more nights, she told herself. One in Venice, just so she could say she had dipped her toes in the water, so to speak, and then back up to Milan to catch her flight back to New York. Hopefully she'd find a cheap enough hotel. It really annoyed her, being forced to pay first-class. So the train got there a half hour earlier—that was hardly worth the excess fare.

Regan found the very idea of first-class to be offensive. Fancy velvet-covered seats and plush carpeting versus plain cloth seats—what difference did it make? She was a practical woman, a straightforward, logical woman. For thirty-six years that had served her well. So what if she'd never had anyone sip champagne from her slipper or propose to her in the lights at Yankee Stadium? She'd had her share of sensible lovers, and sensible marriage offers—and those she'd turned down. Sensibly.

Was she missing out on life? Sure. At this rate she'd never be divorced, or be hip-deep in diapers or have the joy of staring at a lifetime of debt paying college tuition.

Staring out the large, rectangular window, Regan noted that the *rapido* was true to its name. The buildings of suburban Rome, with their hodgepodge tile roofs and strings of mismatched laundry, whipped by like the wind. Squinting, she tried to make it all impressionistic. What would Renoir have made of a trip like this?

Would he have made fuzzy-looking pairs of underwear hanging on fuzzy lines outside fuzzy houses? Karma and Rique, her trusty assistants at the gallery enjoyed poking fun at Regan for her naïve notions of art. Basically, she was a businesswoman, who had managed to find a niche in the creative world. As far as she was concerned, there was no more rhyme or reason to the public's taste in art than there was in fashion.

One of the reasons she did so well was that her clients were much like her—complete outsiders seeking to parlay art investments into solid cash down the line. To that end, she would on occasion tell her painters to slow down, so as not to flood the market with their work.

To Rique, a frustrated painter who, on principle, refused to paint anything a normal person would enjoy, this was sheer heresy. Karma was a little more understanding, though even she was known to leave little doodles around to remind Regan about the “ear” fiasco.

Regan continued to monitor the scenery, her travel log in hand. The suburban landscape was giving way to rolling green hills, dotted with hearty olive trees and clustered grapes. Ancient craggy trees and rustic towns stood from the heights, just as they had for centuries.

“A country church,” she murmured to herself, checking off one of the items on her list. “One step closer to home.”

To make it official, she double-checked the corresponding number. A 6.5 according to a system understood only by her.

It was a little while after this that the compartment door slid open. She hoped it was merely the conductor and not someone wanting to sit with her. As she turned to the door, however, she saw it was not *someone* at all.

It was *him*.

Regan’s insides dropped down out of the bottom of the train onto the tracks. What were the odds? What were the fucking, good-for-nothing, cotton-picking odds?

“I’ve been looking all over,” he said. “Thank God I found you.”

Regan felt a tightening in her belly. A strange mix of emotions. “You came after me?”

“I wasn’t able to catch you before you left. I had to get on the train, and search car to car. Unfortunately, I’ve missed my own train to Florence.”

She frowned, confusion turning to anger. The nerve of the man to think that she would even be interested. “Am I supposed to turn cartwheels over that? In my country what you’ve done is called stalking...and it’s a crime.”

"Stalking?" He knitted his perfect brow. In the dimmer light his five o'clock shadow stood out even more prominently, giving him an edge, a keen rawness. "I'm not familiar with the idiom."

"It's when a man comes after a woman, with intent."

"Intent to do what?"

"You know very well what," she accused.

He thinned his lips, frowning. "The only thing I know," he stated, still standing in the doorway, "is that I came to give you this."

She watched as he pulled the small blue object from his pocket. It was embossed in silver, with the eagle of the United States of America.

"My passport," she identified the item, feeling only slightly higher than the half-inch heels of her sandals.

"It slid against the wall, against the agent's counter. We both must have missed it. I managed to step on it as I was buying my own ticket...to Florence."

"The train you missed," she said sheepishly.

"I'm afraid so."

"I'll make up the loss."

"It's not important. My business there can wait another day." He gestured toward the long double seat across from her—plush blue velvet with thick headrests. "May I rest a moment? I'm a bit worn out."

"Yes, of course." To say anything else at this point would be the height of ungratefulness. Still, she'd be happy to see him move on.

She jolted slightly as he slid the door closed. With far too much ease, he settled down. What was that scent he was wearing? She'd attempted to block it out the first time they'd met. Here in this tiny compartment, though, it was unavoidable. Like musk, but riper. Ancient but vibrant, sweet but not in a feminine way. Full of delightful, seductive contradiction like the country itself.

The effect was doubled by the faint smell of the stylish black leather jacket. Hardly cheap, but worn without pretense. A man who could handle money and probably women, too. How old was he—twenty-five at most? How did men get so sexually sure of themselves here? It had to be in the water, or maybe the wine.

“Your property.” He handed over the passport.

“Thank you.” She gingerly avoided flesh contact this time.

“You’re much lovelier than your photograph,” he said.

Regan wasn’t sure what to do with the compliment. For a man easily ten years her junior he was managing to keep her mightily off balance. It was the book giving him the advantage. It had to be. Thanks to her carelessness she’d allowed this stranger to be privy to something far more personal than if she’d shown him her undergarments. What on earth had she been thinking keeping that stupid book in her purse? She couldn’t even read the darned thing. It would take her like a million years to translate it.

She attempted a diversionary joke. “Well, you know what they say about passport photos.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I don’t.”

His expression was endearing, dangerously charming.

“I forgot.” She found herself unable to repress a small smile. “You’re foreign. In the States, people always say how horrible passport photos turn out. Like mug shots.”

“Perhaps that’s where the expression ‘Ugly American’ comes from,” he mused.

This time she chuckled. Could it be the man might keep the proceedings mercilessly platonic? Might there be a chance yet to turn the whole *rapido* first-class, second-class nightmare into a distant, amusing memory?

“You might be right,” she said. “Seriously, though. I want to thank you for bringing my passport. You’ve saved me a great deal of trouble. They’d never have let me go home, I’m afraid.”

He smiled wryly. "Actually, I pity any of our poor customs agents who ever try to stop you. That poor railway agent looked like he was ready to put in for early retirement."

"Oh, stop." She flushed. "I wasn't that bad."

"No," he grinned. "You were delightful. My name is Giovanni, by the way."

He leaned forward, giving her a partial view of his rock-solid torso.

"I'm Regan." She took his hand.

Giovanni's grip was firm, enveloping, but not smothering. His were warm and capable hands, the kind a woman could get into trouble with very quickly. "It's a pleasure," he said.

The way he said the word pleasure made her pussy pulse. Was she the only one imagining herself on her knees right now, pulling down his zipper and taking out his cock, licking it to rock-hard for a proper sucking?

Careful, girlfriend...you're playing with fire. Have you forgotten this is the same man who, in all probability, knows your deepest sexual fantasy in the whole wide world?

Her only hope was to keep the conversation light, dispassionate. Flipping back her riot of red-gold curls—the exact hue of her father's locks—she took a stab at idle conversation.

"So where are you from, Giovanni?"

He casually stretched his leg a foot or so to her left. One palm rested on his muscular thigh, the other was on the seat next to him. She wanted to be over there, touching him, being touched back in return. What would those hands feel like on her woman's body? What would he do to those curves? What long-dormant things might he awaken in her?

"I was born in San Borromeo," he said, the pride in his voice an aphrodisiac. "Sadly, it is a town unknown outside of the region, but those in Tuscany know it as having the finest olives in the world. And our Chianti isn't bad, either. Did I mention the women?"

"No." She noted the wonderful sparkle in his eyes. "Is there one you're particularly partial to?"

Omigod – why did I ask that? Talk about sending the wrong message.

"I could never do such a thing. It would give insult to play favorites."

"It's amazing," she noted, thankful to have dodged a bullet. "You have almost no accent."

"I was raised mostly in London. My father is a British businessman. My mother sings opera for La Scala."

"The great opera house in Milan," Regan said knowingly. "I plan to see it on the way to the airport day after tomorrow. It's worth an 8.5."

He gave her a blank look. "Eight point five?"

"On my Sightseeing Priority Scale," she explained proudly. "I rate each site in the guide book based on a formula, taking into account and weighing equally the cultural value of each location, its accessibility and overall cost. The Coliseum, for example, rates a ten. It positively reeks of historical value. I got through it in less than a half hour, arch to arch, and it didn't cost a nickel. I was going to stop at the Leaning Tower of Pisa on the way to Venice—it's a 9.5, after all—but then I got stuck on this stupid express."

Giovanni said nothing, regarding her with utter non-comprehension.

"Well, I only have a certain amount of time," she said, feeling a little defensive.

"Forgive me," he shook his head. "I meant no offense. It's just that the idea of assigning numbers to the world's most beautiful places just seems to be so...unfeeling."

"That's just the point," she declared. "I am a person of reason, taking a reasonable trip."

"But what room do you leave for passion?"

Regan frowned. To be asked this by a man as gorgeous as Michelangelo's *David* in a tiny train compartment was more than a little disconcerting. "Passion is not part of my nature."

“Really?” His brow arched again, the expression in his eyes—a momentary flash of electric blue—making her toes curl. “What about the book, then? That is full of passion, is it not?”

Regan fought back a wave of panic. So he did know after all. For a moment she’d thought he hadn’t seen the front of the book or was at least going to be gentlemanly enough not to mention it. Instead he’d only been playing possum. Waiting for her to let down her guard. Waiting for her to be on a first-name basis, to feel invested and trusted and...vulnerable.

Maybe she should make a run for it. He didn’t seem like the type who’d try to stop her. Why should *she* flee, though? He was the one crossing the line of decency.

“How dare you?” she scathingly challenged. “You had no right to invade my privacy like that.”

“You are right.” He rose to his feet. “I shall leave at once. You have my apology for overstaying my welcome.”

“Wait a minute.” For some reason she did not want him to go just yet.

“Yes?”

“What if I let you stay,” she bargained. “So long as you promise to keep to...more polite subjects?”

He shook his head gravely. “That’s not possible. I see that now.”

“Why?” she demanded, inexplicably irritated. “Do you have that little respect for me? Just because I’m a foolish American who numbers her tour sites?”

“It’s not a matter of disrespect, Regan. In fact, I respect you quite a lot. Enough to leave before things take a direction we might both regret.”

“Stop talking like a character in a European novel,” she complained. “Just say what’s on your mind.”

“Very well. If I stay here with you, we are going to end up in bed and I don’t think you want that.”

Her mouth opened in disbelief. "You arrogant, presumptive son of a bitch. To even think I'm attracted to you, or that you could somehow seduce me against my will is totally absurd."

He stood in the doorway of the compartment, totally composed, totally in control. "It's far from absurd," he said. "That book of yours? I know the author, Anna Paulina. I know her real name. And I know the way she cries out under the lash. Do you think that is only fiction? There are people who live such fantasies."

Regan felt the blood drain from her face. This Giovanni was more than just a potential threat, he was her worst nightmare come true—the exact sort of man who could completely expose her hidden self.

"You're right," she said numbly. "You should leave." And then a second later, with his back already turned, "No...wait."

"You need to make up your mind, Regan."

The sudden firmness in his voice caught her off-guard. "I'd like you to stay," she said softly. "To talk."

"It will be more than talk," he warned.

She nodded, telling herself she'd find a loophole. As long as she kept her resolve, she'd be fine. This man would not force himself on her, she knew that instinctively. She still called the shots, as long as she kept her nerve. "Please, just sit back down."

Regan felt like a lamb, inviting a hungry lion to lie down next to it for a supposed nap. It was only a matter of time until those jaws showed themselves. Still, she felt a strange fascination, an indescribable curiosity. What would it be like when he made his move? What exactly did he have in mind? And how could he be so sure of the results of his efforts when she had no idea of how she'd respond?

"Have you ever been in bondage?" he wanted to know as soon as he was back in his seat.

Talk about cutting to the chase. "That's a pretty personal question, Giovanni."

"But you will answer me nonetheless," he predicted.

If there was one thing she hated, it was people—men—trying to tell her what to do or think. "No, I've never played any bondage games," she informed him. "Not that it's your business."

"I didn't ask you if you had played games," he said, his face expressionless. "I asked if you were put into a state of bondage. You understand the difference?"

She did. All too well. "You make it sound like something forced on a person," she defied.

"It's an act of surrender. By one craving the domination of another."

The words came charged from off his tongue. Surrender. Craving. Domination. Bypassing her brain, they went directly to her sex, wetting it, opening it, making her want and need things she dared not admit even to herself.

"You're just a boy," she blurted in a last-ditch effort at self-defense. "How would you know any of the deeper things between a man and a woman?"

His smile was the richest, most ironic yet. If she'd thought to shake him up, it was having the opposite effect.

"Which frightens you most?" he wondered aloud. "That I don't understand your sexual needs, or that I do?"

"You can answer questions with questions all you like. The fact remains, I have what...five, ten years on you? You'll never match my experience."

"And yet you'll submit to me, anyway," he goaded. "Just because I'm a male and you're a female. To my inexperience, you will crawl. And my youth."

"That's the worst form of male chauvinism," she accused.

"Isn't it, though?" His smile broadened to Cheshire Cat proportions. "And that makes you horny, doesn't it? Go on, admit it to me—to yourself. Anna Paulina writes about the kind of woman who can be humbled into arousal, degraded into ecstasy. You

are quite a special breed. For a man to possess one of your kind is the greatest privilege, but also the most awesome responsibility."

"I'm not like a pet ferret," she informed him, "with feeding and grooming instructions. I am a human female and if you want to try — emphasis on try — to win my affections, you will have to appeal to my higher nature."

"Really? And how do you think Laura, the heroine of your book ends up on the lap of Roger, her ass bared for abuse? By a formal invitation?"

"I'm sure I don't care one way or the other," she said, turning up her nose.

"You lovely little liar. I'll wager you pored over that dictionary of yours trying to figure out what was between those covers."

"My interest was not personal. I'm studying the culture, that's all."

He barely contained a smirk. "And pray tell, what value does a naked, spanked ass have on your scale? Does it rank with the Tower of Pisa?"

"Screw you," she snapped. "And incidentally — your little idea about getting in my pants? It isn't even close to working. I would as soon sleep with that railway agent as I would with you."

"I'm sure he'd be thrilled to know that. As for submitting to me, I haven't actually made a move yet."

Regan gritted her teeth. This was not good news. If Giovanni was able to get her this bothered, and this hot, without even trying, what would happen if he made a concerted effort?

"You're bluffing," she said. "If you had any real power, you'd have exerted it."

"On the contrary. Power is most effective when not exerted."

"Anyway," she shrugged, "I'm leaving for home the day after tomorrow. You'll never even see me again."

"I can accomplish quite a lot by then."

"In your dreams."

"Tonight, you'll stay the night with me in Venice," he said, oblivious to her objections. "I will show you things. From the book."

"You and that stupid book," she spat. "You like it so much? Here."

Regan dug it from her bag and tossed it across the compartment. He caught it, as though he'd asked for it.

"Page seventy-nine." He opened it at random, beginning to read. "Laura tugged at the cuffs on her wrists. The height of the chains barely allowed her to touch her bare toes to the floor of the bedroom. Roger's genius in securing her this way—naked, her breasts and belly against the post of the monstrous bed, the door behind her back—was as indisputable as it was devious. She would never see him enter, never know ahead of time what he intended to do first to her. Would it be his whip upon her fair skin or his cock thrust up hard inside her sex? Or maybe he would take her anally..."

"Bastard," she hissed.

"Why not ask me the question that is on your mind?" He smiled. "Is this real? Did I do this to Anna Paulina or did another man? Or maybe she only dreamed it."

"I'm leaving," said Regan.

Now it was Giovanni's turn to stop her at the doorway. He did so with both hands on her upper arms.

"Let go," she demanded.

Her protests dissolved into a moan as he took her lips. There was no other way to describe it than that. For gentle and passionate though he might have been, there was no mistaking the claim he was staking, the signal he was sending, the complete and thorough translation of his every promise into the most intimate and physical terms.

Regan's mouth went slack as their bodies merged. Her nipples went high and tight against his chest. She felt the burning deep inside. Oh, god, he was hard, pushing against her pelvis. Did he plan to take her right there, on the train? She offered no

resistance as his hands slid down to cup her ass cheeks. Naturally, with all the feminine inclination in the world, she began to move against him. Offering.

Giovanni lifted his hand and delivered a hard smack, efficient and stinging. The blow reminded Regan all over again of why they were doing this—of the book and his plan to act it out. She drew a soft breath, a half-moan. It was a betrayal of her earlier show of independence. That she wanted this—needed it and craved it even—was no longer at issue.

But why here and now, with him?

Giovanni took her cheeks in his palms, holding and focusing, as if to deal with these residual doubts. “You are mine,” he said. “Until morning. At that time, I will release you.”

Her affirmation was barely audible.

“Put out your wrists,” he said. “And cross them.”

She did so, allowing him to secure them with his belt. He looped it many times, before tying off the worn leather. Tugging at the finished product, she was amazed at how firmly it held. A fresh wetness came to her pussy as she contemplated that fact. Giovanni might be young but he knew how to secure a woman.

And how to dominate one too, unless she missed her guess.

Drawing her close, her bound wrists tight against her belly, he sealed the matter with another kiss. This time he probed her mouth, exploring deeply with his tongue. Regan whimpered with need—the need to be held, to be had, to be laid down and loved. Every inch of her body, as she’d never been loved before.

His hands went to her thighs, sliding up under the hem of her sundress. His touch scorched and promised and awakened...too many things to be counted.

“On the seat.” He nibbled at her neck. “Kneeling, facing the wall.”

It was an order and Regan’s place was to obey. The intent—whatever he might have—was his alone to know, his alone to exploit. She left his embrace, lightheaded, a

different woman already. Alive, expectant, and radiant, though weak as a kitten. Had the seat not been there to catch her, she might have fallen to the floor.

With his tongue, he'd already been inside her...done something irreversible and deep. Gripping the back of the seat with her imprisoned hands, not daring to imagine what might befall her next, she rested her knees on the velvet. The sensation sent a shiver down her spine. Every part of her was filled with sensation. His presence overwhelmed—the raging, male scent pervaded the cabin, the heat of his turgid body, the electric force of his will.

He was behind her, like Roger was behind Laura. A genius move, clever and devious. She'd never see it coming. Pleasure or pain. Fore or aft. How would he use her?

Giovanni began with the lightest of caresses on her ass. He might as well have struck her, given the flood it unleashed. Synapses firing, nerves in agony, she fell forward against the headrest of the middle seat.

"You wished only to talk," he reminded her of her earlier words, so obviously spoken in vain.

She gritted her teeth. How long was he going to rub her nose in his victory? "Yes," she panted bravely, fighting her deepest urge to submit. "And if you keep me waiting, I may go back to that."

Giovanni flipped up her skirt. She had a funny feeling that she should not have taunted him.

"For that I will deny you relief," he told her, pulling her panties down to the backs of her thighs. "Until you beg me for it."

"We haven't long," she reminded with a grimace, "'til Venice."

"I'll break you long before then."

Regan released a moan. She was on the verge already. Never had she encountered a man like this, so confident and sure of himself. Not obnoxious, not bragging, just...certain. As though he was born for this moment. Born to master her.

Giovanni found her clit immediately.

"No, don't..."

He slapped her ass. "Be careful how you use that word, 'no'. It can have more than one meaning in this context. In fact, we shall have between us an agreement. If anything is truly too much for you, use the word *rapido* and I will cease immediately. Otherwise I shall feel free to ignore your pleas, even as you may indulge in being overpowered."

Rapido. A code word to end their interaction. So it was still play after all. This was good to know. She had to be able to trust this man at a more fundamental level. She had to know that he would not hurt her, that he would, in the end, respect her limits. Instinctively, she felt that he *would* respect them, which was odd because he was a stranger. It was so unlike her to abandon her reason, and on foreign soil no less.

If only Rique and Karma could see her now.

The one finger was replaced by two, a pseudo cock sliding efficiently and stealthily down her canal. Regan's pussy muscles clenched against Giovanni's knuckles, unconsciously willing the larger member to fill her...the as-yet-unseen member between his legs.

"You have the most beautiful lips I have ever seen," said Giovanni. "You are a masterpiece. I should have thrown your passport away so you would never be able to leave my country."

Regan laughed lightly between sighs. How was it that he could say things, do things that would seem trite, even corny coming from a lesser man?

"You know...how to play them," she breathed.

Just as quickly as the pleasure began, it was plucked away. "You're not begging," he noted.

He softened her up with a couple of stinging, hot swats to her buttocks. That was just the primer for his next move, the *coup de grâce*.

Regan gasped aloud as she felt the head of his cock gently nudging her sex. He was going to fuck her after all.

"Giovanni, yes..." she encouraged.

He entered a tiny bit, then withdrew, just enough to tantalize. "Is that what you wanted?"

Here it comes, she thought. The abandonment of my pride.

"You know I do, you bastard."

Giovanni pinched her posterior. A part of her liked that, and egged him on.

"We can take that belt off your wrists and use it back here, you know."

"You wouldn't dare!"

His cock—just the bulbous, throbbing head—pushed the pink flesh of her labia aside a second time.

"Laura begs for the belt, somewhere in the fifth chapter," he pointed out. "She comes from the sensations, though that isn't very frequent in real life."

"Just get it over with, why don't you."

"No." His cock came back out.

She pushed herself back against him. He smacked her. "Hold still."

Regan whimpered. He had her cornered.

"Good girl," he soothed, massaging her clit.

"I'm a woman, not a girl."

"You're a female. Who needs to be fucked."

She let loose like a shattered dam. "Yes, Giovanni. Please...fuck me?"

He sank his cock halfway. She grabbed at the seat with her fingernails. She didn't dare breathe, fearing she'd explode on the spot. If he moved now, if he went any deeper...

"This is only the beginning," he said, holding her in that shadow state between ecstasy and agony. "When I have you behind closed doors, I will take control of you. No inhibitions. No holding back. Your body will sing for me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Giovanni."

What a liar she was. Just like he'd said. What did she know of submitting to beautiful Italian strangers on trains or in hotel rooms?

"You will not come without my permission. That is a requisite of your bondage."

"Giovanni, I can't—"

He pushed himself home, the triumphant conqueror, unopposed by her fragrant, vanquished pussy. "If you disobey, Regan, you will be punished."

"Punished..." The word poured out, liquid heat, pure sin.

"That's right, Regan. Punished. You're mine tonight. If required, you'll be put over my lap. Spanked. Whipped. And there are other things, too. Subtle. Mental."

She tried to hold back. It was like blocking a tornado with a piece of cardboard. "Giovanni, mercy..."

He withdrew and promptly reentered. "Mercy denied."

"Please, please..."

His hands found her hips, locking her into position.

"Let me...come..." she cried, the words emitted in short, desperate stabs.

Giovanni started to fuck her with long, artful strokes. "That sounds like a demand to me."

"No, I'm not demanding," she hastily retracted. "I'm..."

Begging—go on, say it. We both know the word is hanging in the air. You're beaten, woman, why not admit it?

Regan groaned as her breasts were shoved against the seat. There was no escape. It would go on and on and on. Until Giovanni got his way. Until she backed down. Completely.

"I need to come, Giovanni. Please, may I come?"

"You have much to learn about begging, Regan."

His words flashed back into her brain, about how he would reduce her to utter submission before they reached their destination. *I'll break you long before then*, he'd told her.

"I'm giving in, Giovanni," she sought to appease him. "You were right, I admit that."

"There is no question that I was right," he said. "I am not looking for affirmation from an equal, but submission from an inferior."

"I'm...I'm not inferior," she denied, thrashing her head.

"In this context..." he reached around to palm her left breast through the thin cotton of her top. "What else would you call it?"

He had hold of her ripe nipple, manipulating it between his thumb and forefinger. The pressure was like a cord attached to and pulling directly on her nether regions.

"I'm yours," she cried.

"My pussy," he emphasized.

"Your pussy...oh, god...yours, Giovanni."

"My breast."

"Yours...take me, Giovanni...use me...fucking use me..."

"You're my plaything." He nibbled at her earlobe. "Aren't you?"

It was a revelation, a liberation. "Your little fuck toy, Giovanni." She relished the naughty language, the naughty thoughts. "Please, make me come, make me scream."

"You'll come with me, Regan, holding nothing back."

"Yes, Giovanni, yes, yes..."

Giovanni slammed his cock hard into her, forcing her to brace her smaller, female body against the seat. "This," he grunted in deep male satisfaction, "is domination."

He was like a piston now, unleashing himself on her pussy – on his pussy. In and out, with a furious tempo that matched the clacking of the wheels over the railroad tracks. She was doubly penetrated, doubly jarred as the heavy-duty Ferroviaria Centrale locomotive powered along its route. *Rapido. Rapido. Rapido.*

Giovanni exploded inside of her just as they passed one of the smaller stations. A whoosh of Mediterranean tile roof, whitewashed brick and worn faces – old-timers waiting for local trains.

"Regan," he called her name, his semen spurting into her. She wanted to cry from the sensation of it. But she had her own orgasm to deal with, too. A wave of orgasm that engulfed his seed and pulled them both, irrevocably, over the waterfall.

She turned her head, craning her neck. "Gio...vanni," she replied.

He continued pumping until every drop was drained. Even then, he persisted, with long strokes, gradually easing to a stop. At last, his cock softening, he came to rest.

"The train will be arriving at the station soon," he said, freeing her. "Let's get you together."

Good timing, she thought. *He pulls out and the train pulls in.* Still in a daze, she pulled her underwear back up and smoothed her skirt.

"You were magnificent," he assured her, brushing loose hairs in shades of rust and glinting copper from her damp forehead.

"You weren't so bad yourself."

"You all right," he inquired, "with everything that has happened so far?"

The concern in those blue eyes, deep and genuine as anything she'd ever seen in a man, melted her heart.

"I'm fine, thank you."

That's it, she coached herself. Keep your cool. Keep control. You're the older one here. In reality, she was more than fine. She was wonderful. But she had no intention of letting him know that. Not with that deviant mind of his.

Speaking of which, had he been bluffing with that possessing her all night business?

"About Venice," she ventured. "You weren't serious, were you...about tonight?"

His smile was slanted. If anything he was more cocksure than ever. Not to mention twice as sexy. "As a matter of fact—" he zipped up his fly, putting away his magnificent cock once again. "I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

"I was afraid of that," she grumbled.

Giovanni laughed. "You know how adorable you are when you are exasperated, *Carina?*"

"What did you call me?"

"It means pretty or adored one in Italian."

She fought back a blush. "Well, you can't call me that," she declared as the train slowed to a stop at the Venice Station.

"You'll get used to it," he promised, delivering a gentle, though possessive pat on her ass.

"Don't count on it." She pushed his hand away as they left the compartment.

What Giovanni didn't need to know, as they negotiated their way down the narrow corridor to the exit, was that she was already getting used to it. And to him.

Chapter Two

Giovanni Umberto Bellini-Morgan would have to see the priest tomorrow. For one thing, he had seduced a woman out of wedlock and intended to continue doing so until break of day. This carnal sin was complicated by a slight act of deception. Borderline theft, depending on one's perspective.

The fact was, he had not found Regan's passport after she'd left, but had slipped it into his pocket as he was helping her gather the contents of her purse. Slipping the document into the pocket of his jacket had been an entirely spontaneous act, something unprecedented in his young life. He was a bit shocked at himself, frankly.

It was Regan's beauty that had overcome him—the loveliness of her person and the bright shining nature of her spirit. That and the book. By god, what were the odds of such an incredible creature possessing a copy of Anna Paulina's turgid work, that soul-stirring epic based so closely on his own experiences with the woman a year ago at his parent's villa in Sicily? There was only one reason for Regan to have it. At some level, it represented her own nature, her own desires.

The force with which she'd seized it from him confirmed that she did not wish this part of her nature to be revealed. She'd been both excited and frightened. He could sense it in her, from the pink in her cheeks and the light in her eyes, to the gentle perfume of her womanhood.

He simply could not bear to let her go at that moment, knowing he would never see her again. The passport would give him a chance to see her once more, to talk to her again, to touch her hand, perhaps even to see the light of appreciation in her eyes.

Did he hope for more? How could he not? He was half-Italian—the people of *amore*. And the other half belonged to the race of his father, Simon Morgan—fiercely English and determined. He wanted Regan's voluptuous body in his arms. He wanted to test

her to see if she would respond as Anna had. Was she a submissive? Would she give herself over to the power of his masculinity?

Postponing his plans to go to Florence to visit a friend, he'd purchased a ticket on the *rapido*. Armed with the passport, he'd boarded the train, searching car to car. He'd prayed she would be alone. Indeed she had been, and his opportunity was born. It had been touch and go. At the moment that he had excused himself, he'd half-expected her to allow him to leave.

She had, however, taken the bait. She was curious. Just as he was.

From that moment, he'd had no doubts. She would be his. She would live out the fantasy of *Prisoner of Sex*. For one glorious night at least. His cock had never been harder than at the sight of her bare ass, taut and ready. He'd wanted to spank and fuck and kiss her all at once. Restraint on his part was required to build the tension, to create the suspense.

Regan was not the only one to feel the strain of delay. He'd wanted more than anything to plunge himself inside her with abandon. But she needed the teasing, the domination. And he needed it, too. It was the appetizer for what was to follow.

She was branded now, his little *Carina*, and he would carry her along magically on a journey of sexual discovery. It thrilled Giovanni that the woman was older than he—most especially because he knew how much it aggravated her to be dominated by a younger man. But sexual control was no function of age, as he had learned from Mercurio, his great teacher. Giovanni, in his view, was a natural, and even at eighteen, in training, he had been able to effect the impassioned surrender of slave women twice his age.

Mercurio had refined Giovanni's instincts, teaching him various tricks of the trade. The tone of the voice. Maintaining stern eye contact. Above all, though, it was a matter of understanding the woman's psychology. She must be allowed to feel herself utterly safe and protected—free to be her deepest self. Obedience was the deepest gift a

submissive woman could give and if a man failed to understand its sacred nature, then he had no business partaking of the fruits of her surrender.

For many who called themselves Dominants, the thrill came in the total overpowering of the feminine will, but Giovanni had far too much love for the spirit and beauty of a woman's heart. A submissive woman was not a doormat, not a robot. She was a living being, and Giovanni lived to see that ongoing spark. The fight and the surrender and then, when she'd recovered, a fresh fight.

It was the only way he knew to play the game. What joy could there be, anyhow, in winning the compliance of a creature without backbone or resistance? Much better to put chains on a worthy opponent, to see the fire and fury in the eyes, the struggle as she smoldered, melting down to pliancy.

That was his aphrodisiac, and he had never met a match so well-suited as Regan. Already he had won her one time, but she was promising to garner her resources for a second battle.

Good.

"There are several highly rated items on my list here in Venice," she informed him as they climbed off the train onto the busy railway platform. "Some of the best-known sites in the world. Free to the public, and all within walking distance." She pointed eagerly to her notebook. "There's the Bridge of Sighs, the Doge's Palace, and, of course, the Plaza of St. Mark's."

"When we get in the station," he ignored the tiny outstretched binder with the typewritten list, "I want you to take off your underwear. Both bra and panties."

Regan blanched a shade whiter. "I will not."

He'd been prepared for an argument. "I'm offering you the chance to do this, on your own, in the privacy of the women's restroom. If you refuse, I will tend to the matter myself, and I assure you, *Carina*, I will give little consideration to your modesty."

"You're bluffing. You wouldn't dare assault me like that in a public place."

"This isn't the United States," he reminded her. "Do not assume the same rules apply here as to how a man is entitled to discipline his woman."

Actually, it would be considered no more acceptable to strip a woman in Venice than in Cleveland, but he didn't need to tell her that.

"I'm not your woman," she fumed. "Or your girl, or your *Carina*, or anything else. Got it, buddy?"

He raised a single brow, the tiniest motion of his forehead. "I foresee a spanking in your very near future," he predicted. "Unless some drastic change befalls your attitude."

She flipped her curls insolently, oblivious to the fire she was playing with. "It seems to me, you're the one with the attitude problem."

He licked his lips. Had she no idea what she did to his blood? The way she inflamed him with her slightest gestures, with her every little motion?

Employing both hands, fingers splayed on either side of her head, he positioned her face, inclining her neck backward for a kiss.

"No..." she protested with a half whimper, as if to say *not again...so soon*.

This time he merely bit her lower lip, drawing it cunningly between his own to suck the ripe, red flesh. Her eyes went wide. He held her like that, immobile for half a minute.

"How quickly you forgot." He released her mouth, retaining his hold on her face, his fingers gently massaging.

She was forehead to forehead with him, her breathing quick and shallow. The throng disappeared around them. He wanted her to feel nothing but him. His demands and his mind reaching into hers. His imagination—challenging, daring, and pervading her very soul.

He was letting her remember, reinforcing all that had happened. What he'd done to her on the train. And what he'd promised was yet to come.

“Until tomorrow,” he said, speaking the words directly into her ear. For emphasis he repeated the word in Italian, “*Domani*.”

“Yes, Giovanni,” she sighed.

The sound of her voice was music. Intimate and soft. A man could grow far too used to such a sound. He could come to crave it, wanting her to speak this way often, and to him alone.

And her eyes...those emerald jewels, so very expressive. One second’s interaction at a moment like this was worth more than a lifetime’s conversation with most women. Her eyes said, *Yes, I remember. I am yours, though my lips fear the words.*

There was a connection here, between the two of them, he was sure of it. Domination was a matter of the brain, of the intelligence. This he had learned from Mercurio. And Regan, he was quickly learning, was one of the most intelligent women he’d ever met. And one of the bravest. A rival even for his own beautiful mother, Lucia Bellini, the raven-haired heroine of the Italian opera.

He watched Regan’s hips sway, her posterior vanishing as she made her way to the ladies’ room. His cock throbbed in his pants as he pictured her, inside a tiny stall, pulling her dress over her head to unhook her bra. Slipping the panties down over her thighs and off of each trim ankle. Her heart thumping as she attempted to conceal that semi-public stripping. Wondering if others are there, just on the other side of the partition? If they know what she is doing? If they sense that she is a woman in bondage, under the command of a man?

Her panties would be wet and ripe with her scent. Already, on the train her pussy was hot and open, flooded with desire. She was a passionate woman—potentially the most passionate he’d ever been with. Only Anna Paulina was her rival, and she was a seasoned submissive, a woman with years of training in the art of opening her body to male predation.

She would put the panties in that bag of hers, that crazy collection of mismatched items. The bra would go there, as well. She’d feel the cotton of her dress directly against

her nipples. The tiny buds would harden from the friction. It would make her feel so breathless and aroused. How he longed to see those nipples. To caress them. To pinch them. To clamp them with erotic clips.

And between her legs...how exposed she would be there. The air venting her pussy. So completely vulnerable. No one would know, at least from a distance, except for him. He alone would guard the secret...that with a single motion of his hand he could expose her.

Giovanni could barely contain himself while waiting for her to return. For the first time in his life he found himself obsessed and consumed wholly with one woman. Dozens of beauties were passing him by, long-legged sirens with silky hair and bedroom eyes, yet he did not care. Any number could be his for the taking, and more than a few were blatantly staring but it made no difference. This hard-on was for her. For Regan, whose last name he did not even know.

He could have found it in the passport when he'd flipped it open to check the photograph, but he hadn't wanted to go that far.

A fine bit of hypocrisy, that. Too much of a gentleman to breach the privacy of her documents, but not so much so as to refrain from stealing it and subsequently breaching a far greater privacy.

A gentleman would not have imposed his person on Regan. Nor would he have bound her wrists, spanked her ass, and fucked her on a train. Thank god he was not a gentleman, he smiled wryly to himself.

* * * * *

Regan splashed water on her face. She was burning up. One look in the bathroom mirror said it all. An aroused, turned-inside-out woman—naked under her dress, completely under the sexual spell of a stranger—stared back at her. Everything about her spelled impending disaster. What if someone were to search her bag? They'd find

her underwear for heaven's sake. Her panties, sex-sopped, saturated with her own fluids and that of a man.

A man's semen, oozing out of her in a public restroom in a foreign country. The result of a furious, anonymous fuck, her wrists bound on the afternoon *rapido* to Venice. How did that rank on her sightseeing scale? Giovanni was certainly a work of art—enough to put Michelangelo's *David* to shame. She hadn't needed to go out of her way to be had by him, since he came to her. That made it a highly convenient experience.

What about the cost, though? There wasn't any upfront price to having that gorgeous man have his way with her, but what about hidden charges? Already he wanted her for a night. Dusk to dawn, the entire cycle of a shining moon. In the fabled city of Venice, no less. By all accounts the most romantic locale on the entire planet.

Talk about a price to pay. If he wanted, he'd have her mortgaged to the hilt by sunrise. Head over heels. Out of her rational mind. Maybe for good. Just look at what he'd reduced her to already. Taking off her underwear in a train station.

Damn, her face looked horrible. Fishing in her accursed bag, she found her lipstick. Passion pink. Not exactly the mood she wanted to convey to the man, but it was the only shade she had. She winced as the dress rubbed over her bare ass. She could still feel the tingling where he'd spanked her. And the fullness, like his cock was still inside her, filling and emptying, playing her senses like a master conductor.

No one had ever fucked Regan like that. She'd had on-again, off-again boyfriends for years, even a fiancé for a time, and none had ever come so close to her core as this man had after a single try.

If you could even call it trying. He'd taken possession of her body with such utter naturalness that it was like he'd been born for the task. She'd had no idea she could come like that, with or without a man present. What would it be like if he had a chance to really warm her up, to practice some foreplay, as he could in a hotel room? It was a bit of a scary prospect. Hard to say what motivated a man like that. He really didn't seem like the one-night stand type. He was just too centered, too deep. Maybe she was

being naïve, but she had pretty good instincts about men and she could usually tell when they were just after her body. This Giovanni was looking for more than that.

And yet he'd told her it was just for one night...

Would he let her go by morning? Would she be able to go?

If she were smart, she'd take off right now, underwear and all. A quick goodbye, or none at all. *Sayonara*, buddy. Or *rapido*, as the escape code went. Nice knowing you, wish you all the best...

What could he say? What could he do in the middle of a crowd? Except to bow, kiss her hand, and say thank you, or whatever else came to that European mind of his. Yes, that was the safe thing to do. She could go on her way, get her sightseeing in by midnight, crash in some hotel and head for Milan in the morning. Twenty-four hours from now she'd be on the plane home, none the worse for wear.

A suitcase full of souvenirs and a heart full of regrets.

She looked in the mirror and sighed. *I can't do it*, she thought. *I can't walk away. I have to know. I have to feel this. I have to...trust.*

Giovanni was waiting for her just outside the door. He was leaning against the wall, one foot up against the bricks, casual, sexy as hell. He was smoking a cigarette, not seeming to give a damn if she ever came back. His eyes were lowered, so she announced her presence.

"I've done it," she said.

He dropped the cigarette to the concrete and ground it with the tip of his boot. "Let's go."

Regan was a little miffed. After all the trouble she'd gone through, he wasn't even acknowledging what she'd said.

"Did you hear me?" she challenged, her modesty temporarily forgotten. "I took off my bra and panties like you said."

His tight lips bordered on a frown. "Do you expect a reward every time you do as you are told?" he inquired. "Because if you do, this night is going to get a bit tedious."

His harsh words came as a slap across the face. "Don't worry," she snapped, "I won't trouble you anymore with my pathetic existence."

Something in his eyes darkened a tiny bit. "I won't tolerate sarcasm, Regan."

Regan stood her ground. No O'Connell ever backed down from a fight, boy or girl. "Then maybe you should find yourself another *Carina*. Because I happen to like being sarcastic."

"It doesn't suit your feminine nature."

She arched a brow. The man was about to find out that he'd tripped the wrong trigger. "What about cussing? Is that more ladylike...you male chauvinist, arrogant, motherfucking asshole?"

Giovanni didn't flinch. "You will control yourself, *Carina*, or you will spend the evening hogtied, naked on the floor of a hotel room while I take in the sights, one to ten."

A part of her wanted to slap him for that. Another knew it was time to throw in the towel, cry *rapido* and run for the hills. But a third part was just too damned curious again—moth to a flame—a hundred questions dancing in her mind. Would he really do such a thing to her poor person? And what would it feel like—to be utterly overpowered by this man, to be put in her place, wickedly and secretly, lowered to a level none had ever dared put her?

Should she push him, to see if he was bluffing?

"Is that what you have to do to be a man?" she taunted. "Is that the only way you can get your way with a woman?"

"With a woman like you? Yes. Let's stop pretending, Regan. You bought a book whose cover features a nearly naked woman over a man's lap being spanked. You go into heat at the very mention of being restrained or controlled. You spread your legs

and gave your body to a stranger in a railway car because he ordered you to. You offered your ass for spanking. You took an unknown cock, without resistance.

"For all intents and purposes, you are playing Laura's part. The prisoner of sex. And I am Roger, here to exploit you and force you to accept the humiliation you so desperately crave. So what's it going to be? Are you going to be an obedient little *Carina* and follow me without question or must I get you somewhere private and punish you?"

Regan's pulse quickened like a rabbit's. "You...you can't talk to me like that," she said, her body overcome with a weakness so delicious and tingling it could almost be described as orgasmic.

He took her hand, wrapping her fingers in his. "I already have."

Giovanni walked her from the train station down to the Grand Canal. Nothing in her experience had prepared her for the sight of Venice at sunset. The main canal was a ribbon of water, a carpet of glistening water along which rode all manner of small boats and gondolas.

On either edge of this vast, magical thoroughfare, she saw buildings out of fairy tales, carved from white stone, pure and fine as Indian ivory, with gold and silver domes and huge columns.

"What do you think?" asked Giovanni, his voice reflecting the obvious pride of his nation.

"It's...unbelievable, Giovanni."

"I sometimes imagine the city floating above the world, awash in the colors of a midnight rainbow. I have painted it this way many times."

She looked at him, for the first time genuinely surprised. "You paint?"

He offered a rakish smile. "I have to do something with my time. Can't go about seducing beautiful women on trains twenty-four hours a day."

She felt a little tug at her heart at the idea of him doing this with other women. It was foolish of her to think she was the first, or the last. Hell, he was too smooth not to have practiced this. Still, she wanted that illusion of exclusivity.

"I've offended you," he said.

"No." She shook her head. Damn it, now there was a dangerous combination. A man sensitive enough to read her feelings and devious enough to exploit them. "I'm just...a little overwhelmed by it all."

"We will have some dinner," he said. "At a café. Then we will ride a gondola. I trust that's on your list?"

"It's a six," she nodded soberly.

An eyebrow shot skyward. "Only a six?"

"Actually, my plan was to ride one of the city waterbuses for a couple of bucks and get the same experience."

Giovanni rolled his eyes. "For a woman of such physical passion, you behave like an old woman."

"I am an old woman. Compared to you."

"In that case, it's time we made you young again." He pulled her happily down the ancient street. They fell into a rhythm quickly, their bodies side by side, their voices bouncing back and forth in a light and easy banter. Regan found it sexy because of the underlying charge.

Every little contact of her naked nipples with the dress reminded her, as did the feel of her pussy lips pressing together, deprived as they were of covering. She was continuously wet, craving, wanting the tiger in him to come out and play.

"Look." She pointed to a cart painted with brightly colored ice-cream cones. "*Gelato*. Let's get one."

"Not now," he said. "You'll spoil your appetite."

"Phooey." She turned up her nose, intent on getting one anyway.

Giovanni grabbed her wrist, quick as lightning. "I said no."

He held her firmly, like a bracelet of loose steel. Their eyes fenced for a second, until she looked pointedly at his cock. This was making him hard. Like it made her wet. It wasn't about ice cream. It was about a man and a woman, wrestling in the most ancient way, playing the most ancient of games. Dominator and dominated. Possessor and possessed. The very pettiness of it, the unimportance of the ice cream itself gave it the deeper meaning it needed. This was courtship. This was foreplay.

"Come with me." He pulled her toward a nearby covered alcove.

She could feel his excitement, the raw power in his hands as he pressed her body to the wall, his hands grabbing at her breasts through her top, molding them to the point of pain, of total constriction.

Never had she wanted so much to be naked, skin to skin. And yet there was an excitement here in the shadows, their bodies still clothed. His cock was pushing hard against her. The muscles of his chest pinned her tightly. She was his, completely.

"Fuck me," she begged, breathless. "Own me."

Was this the ultimate secret to getting into her pants—as if she had any pants? Did this man need only deny her a silly ice-cream cone? The very thought of how helpless, how not in control she was made her that much hotter, that much more needy.

Giovanni pulled up her dress, plunging his fingers into her thirsty hole. "First acknowledge your lesson. You'll eat and drink what I say. You'll ask permission for everything."

She rested the back of her head against the wall. "Yes...sir."

His breath was hot against her neck. Her heart thundered in her chest, her pulse raced out of control. The juices poured from her. She bit her lip, sucking the blood from it in unspeakable anticipation.

She could hardly stand the wait as he unzipped himself, and pulled his shaft free. Greedily, she helped him to push the pulsing, purple-headed rod – hot as fire and twice as powerful – deep into the vacuum of her pussy.

He groaned, feeling how badly she needed this. Feeling the physical evidence of just how much it all turned her on. There was no finesse this time, no teasing. He came into her like an animal, his cock hard as steel, larger even than before. She lifted herself, wrapping her legs around his midsection. She wanted it deep and fast and that was what he gave her. It was a fuck of pure possession. Marking territory. No talk of when and if she came, and yet somehow, deep down, she knew his body was leading and carrying hers. He would never abandon her. Even in her basest subjugation – screwed against a wall, denied so simple a freedom as buying an ice-cream cone – she knew she was cared for. What an odd paradox. With other men she'd felt so alone, barely along for the ride, despite their fancy talk and wooing with endless dinners and flowers.

He exploded inside her with precious violence of male power unleashed upon her, a hot rain, cracking with thunder. She gave way to him, loosing her own avalanche of liquid submission. It was like it had been on the train. Again, they were not alone, not in private. Their sex belonged to the world as surely as she belonged to him. Sweetly, sublimely, she clung to his neck, her pussy taken over, programmed to match his throbbing and pulsing as he filled her with yet another stream of his semen.

Rich and thick and warm, filling her deep to the recesses of her womb. She clung to him now, terrified to let go, far too open, disintegrated even. If he should let her spill...upon the pavement, between the cracks.

"Aren't you glad," he rasped in her ear, knowing exactly how to ground her in the moment, "that we didn't get that ice cream?"

She laughed against him. Delightful, wonderful man. Not young at all, but possessing of some kind of seasoning, a wisdom far beyond his years. Where had it come from? And what price in suffering had he paid for it?

"Yes," she agreed, determined not to miss a beat. "Because now you'll have to buy me a bigger dinner."

Giovanni withdrew, removing his splendid erection. She hated to see it go. Not for long, though, if she had any say in the matter.

"We'll see," he smiled, smoothing her dress back down over her hips.

And a nice glass of wine, too, she continued to tingle, to clear her head and help her take stock of her situation.

A situation that was getting wilder by the minute.

* * * * *

"So you say that you actually have no appreciation for art whatsoever?" Giovanni asked in astonishment.

Regan sipped her wine, her third full glass. Her cheeks were slowly coming to match the color of the Chianti.

"I sell art," she declared. "And I buy it. I wouldn't do either well if I consumed it. It would be like a food salesman, eating all the profits and weighing a thousand pounds."

He watched her small hands fingering the glass. Later she would stroke his cock under command, giving him pleasure according to his precise dictates. "What a utilitarian way you have of looking at things," he marveled. "I wonder, if I tied you down and tongued you to utter sexual distraction, would you still be so cool in your reactions? Have you ever cried out from an orgasm? Have you ever wept during a climax? That is art, *Carina*."

She gulped the wine down and held out her glass. "More."

"No."

She pouted, though she made no attempt to reach for the bottle on her own. "If you think I'm going to continue to put up with you sober..."

“You’re past sober already.”

Regan relented. “So tell me about yourself. So far you know that I manage an art gallery, I come from Philadelphia, I’m an Irish cop’s brat, I have no sense of art or culture and I’m a total klutz at train stations. All I know about you is your mom sings opera and your dad is in business in England.”

“Why talk about me?” he teased. “When we can talk about what I’m going to do to you in our room after the gondola ride?”

That look washed over her again—that excited, nervous submissive look—the one she couldn’t hide. At once her tone turned soft and slightly reverent. “Please, Giovanni, I really want to know who you are. And how someone your age got so much...experience.”

The shift in her demeanor made him hard. He delighted in plucking her this way, like a fine stringed instrument, taking her through the full range of emotion, defiance to complicity, and back again.

“You’ll take my cock, of course, between your lips.” He ignored her inquiry for the time being. “Have you done much by way of fellating your lovers?”

“Some,” she replied hesitantly.

“You will find the riding crop is an excellent teacher. I have one in my luggage.”

By now their luggage would have been delivered to the Pensione Mariani, a quaint, richly appointed hotel of the highest caliber. He’d paid a porter at the train station to tend to the matter. Their bags sat waiting in the top-level suite, with a balcony overlooking the Grand Canal. The cost was astronomical, but more than a bargain considering the delights in store for him there. And for her, too.

Giovanni was not a man to quibble over Euros, or dollars or pounds. For one thing, he had no shortage of them thanks to a successful art career. Secondly, even were he down to his last coin, he would spend it on the pleasures of the nearest available woman.

It wasn't bragging to say he'd been with hundreds of them, and it was a fairly safe bet that this shy, innocent American would vanish in a heartbeat if she knew his track record. The only thing he could say in his defense was that never once had he made love to a woman without being fully and completely in the moment with her.

Regan fingered her empty glass, worrying the smooth stem. "You have a whip... Why am I not surprised?"

"I'm Roger," he grinned. "Remember?"

"And I'm to be your Laura..."

"Unless you say *rapido*."

She looked at him. "You'd really stop, if I said the word?"

"I would, but you already knew the answer to that question."

"I did?"

"Yes, or else you wouldn't be here with me now."

"Maybe I'm still going to bail before the rough stuff."

"And miss out on a ten plus experience?" He held out the bottle, allowing her another half a glass. "Think of it. No cost, no side trips, and completely, one hundred percent historically and culturally crucial."

"You're mocking me," she decided, raising the glass to her lips.

"No drinking until I say so," he stopped her cold. "And no, I'm not mocking you, merely playing with you a little."

"It's the same thing," she complained.

"Take the glass and press it between your breasts," he ordered.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I will give you to the waiter for the night."

She licked her lips. Eyes bright and hot. "And deprive yourself?"

"I will watch, and use you when he's done."

She pushed the goblet into her cleavage. "You're a very bad man."

"Rub the glass, side to side. Touch your nipples."

Regan closed her eyes and did as she was told. Her back arched, indicating that she was finding the magic buttons.

"Does this make you wet?" he asked. "Obeying me? Humiliating yourself for me?"

"Yes," she sighed. "It does."

"And this is why you are mine to command, *Carina*. Your body is programmed to respond. To betray your free will, each and every time. The sex is only the smallest part of it. Far greater, much more pervasive is the time leading up to it, the anticipation. For the rest of our time together, my love, you are allowed no thoughts but those of pleasing me. You will consider yourself wholly and totally an object of my desires. With every breath, you'll feel my cock in you. With every blink you'll see yourself, helplessly splayed before me. The visions will overwhelm you. You'll cling to me—barely able to stand, to exist on your own, and yet you will know that I am the very one devising your erotic mayhem."

"Enough," she whispered, without conviction.

"Chains await you this night, my lovely Regan. And, so too, does the whip."

He watched her breathing, eyes glazed, belly tight, breasts taut. The idea of a whipping had captured her mind already.

"Drink," he commanded, that it might be released into his charge.

She took a sip of the wine, thirsty and weak. He pictured her body, silhouetted against the moonlight, hands secured over her head, writhing to the lightning crack of the crop. Or on her knees, face down across the bed, bare-assed, as he stood behind her, shirtless, administering the delicious, erotic kisses of leather.

"What are you thinking now?" he asked, wanting inside that rich and depthless imagination of hers.

"About the hotel." She shook out her incredible, fire-streaked, copper hair.

"What about it?" He knew from her tone, and the moistness in her green eyes that she would tell him the truth. Complete and unadulterated.

"I'd like to go there now, but I feel cheap and sleazy for wanting to."

"There's nothing cheap or sleazy about a woman needing to explore her deepest sexual self," he said sternly.

"There is if it involves things I've always learned were wrong. The church, my father, they'd all say this was evil."

"Do you think it's evil?"

"I don't know what to think anymore."

He bid her to put down the glass and took her hand. "Don't think anymore," he soothed. "Just be."

He felt the tension drain through her fingers. The satisfaction at this, of giving her a small measure of peace hit him like a ton of bricks. He got a kick out of it, that was for sure.

Or was it more than just a kick he was getting here? To put it another way, when all was said and done, come sunup tomorrow, would it really all be said between them? Or really done? For the first time he began to wonder if this was all so cut and dried. A mere acting out of scenes from a book, written by a lover he'd never truly loved and who had never loved him. Maybe it was more.

If so, it was something he did not yet want to put a name to, not in either one of his two native languages.

Chapter Three

The gondola ride was torture. Giovanni was making her sit with her back against him, a blanket covering her entire lower half as he played shamelessly with her pussy.

Tine and again he brought her to the very brink of climax and held her there. She was terrified to respond, afraid the *gondolier* might see her writhing and know what was being done to her body.

"G-Giovanni," her teeth chattered. "I...can't take anymore."

Giovanni ignored her, continuing his x-rated tour as they floated down the moonlit canal. "Venice in her day was as mighty as Rome. Slave girls were kept naked and chained."

She moaned as the *gondolier* poled them past the Doge's Palace, its towers splendid white against the black, star-speckled sky. He was hooking his pinkie under her clit, releasing another round of pre-orgasmic quakes. "No more, Giovanni, let's go to the hotel...and make love."

"Forgive me," he asked mildly, "but, did I just hear you telling me what to do?"

Regan knew at once she had made a mistake. "No, I swear, Giovanni..."

"Surely you don't see us as equals?" he mused. "Not after all this."

"No, Giovanni..."

"I want you to come for me, Regan. On my finger."

She shook her head no, but Giovanni gave no quarter. Ruthlessly, he took her, inducing total, pussy-clenching surrender. Her hands remained precisely where he'd ordered them to be, uselessly at her sides.

She tried to conceal her shuddering from the man in the straw hat and white pants diligently poling the boat. "Oh, god..." She bit her lip to stifle a scream.

Wave after wave came over her, deep and black, roiling lightly like the canal beneath them. On and on it seemed to go—forever—seconds ticking on the monumental clock in the Tower of St. Mark's.

"Good girl," he praised putting his come-soaked fingers to her lips.

She opened her mouth and began to suck. Between her legs it felt as though a cock was still there, throbbing, pulsing, filling her. She tasted her own juices, cleaning his invading fingers. It was the ultimate in submission, a tacit acceptance of his right to do as he wished with her body.

He kissed her neck, soft and wet and hot. "That is a new lesson for you," he instructed. "Between us, there is no lovemaking. You are taken by my will."

"Yes, Giovanni." Her words were a tiny, dreamy gasp. She wanted more, though she was terrified whether she could handle it or not.

"I'm merely working you up to a proper boiling point," he explained, "so that later there won't be any mistaking your true place before me when I have you crawling about naked on the carpet."

"Please, don't," she urged. "The *gondolier* might hear you."

"What if I want him to hear? In fact, maybe I will tell him all about our relationship. Or do you propose to tell me, again, what to do?"

Regan blanched, not about to fall for that trick again. "No," she said. "I'm not telling you what to do."

"What are you, *Carina*?"

"I'm your...submissive," she answered cautiously.

He chuckled, pulling the blanket up higher. "Reach back, *Carina*, touch my cock."

She gasped at the feel of his erection beneath his jeans. He was hard as a rock, just as if they'd done nothing together at all so far.

Meanwhile, as her fingers trembled under the blanket, Giovanni redirected the *gondolier* innocently, asking him in Italian something about the route they were taking.

The *gondolier* was pointing off to the left, indicating a turn off the main Canal. Giovanni nodded intently, even as he issued fresh instructions out of the side of his mouth.

"Take it out, Regan. Stroke it."

"Here?" Her pulse raced.

"I'm not going to repeat myself. My cock needs attention from my submissive. Now."

"Yes, Giovanni." Her throat was dry from the wine, dry from the cool, crisp open air. She could scarcely believe her hands moving so meekly, so cooperatively beneath the blanket, in surreptitious surrender. No arguments from her this time, no need for threats on his part. She was giving in, unzipping his pants, freeing his cock under cover of the blanket.

Truth be told, she wanted to feel it in her greedy hands, wanted to know what it would be like to touch it, throbbing and hard, with its thick veins sticking out, filled with blood.

She wanted, too, to see that look on his face when she stroked him the right way, giving him the pleasure he wanted. It would be a strange sense of power, even in her subjugation.

Plus there was that factor of the danger, the adrenaline rush of doing something forbidden, something utterly outside the pale of social mores. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. The air felt warm about her, slightly soupy as she fiddled with his clothes. She was flying blind on account of the blanket. Her nerves didn't help any. The way the *gondolier* kept turning back to talk with Giovanni made her want to leap out of her skin each and every time. Did the man know what was happening? Did he want her to give him a hand job, too?

Giovanni's shaft popped out of the opening in his jeans and boxers. Regan shivered, scorching hot as she wrapped her fingers around his cock. It was so very thick and pulsing with life. She felt so small and female in comparison, and yet at the same time

she could sense the power entering her body. To be able to arouse the man, to give him pleasure. She began to masturbate him, squeezing tightly as she moved her hand up and down, slowly, very slowly. This cock had been inside her. Twice. And it would be again. At his whim. Before dawn...

"Touch yourself," Giovanni said. "Touch us both at once."

She slid her other hand beneath the blanket and from there under the hem of her dress. Her pussy was dripping wet, slippery from the orgasm he'd given her. Greedily, she pushed her fingers inside herself.

"Perhaps we should fuck right here," said Giovanni.

Regan's body pulsed with the scandal of it. Should the man want to do this wicked thing, she would be powerless to stop him. In fact, the very possibility made her want to come on the spot.

"Or maybe I will have you swallow me whole," he speculated. "Tell me, Regan, what do you want?"

He might have been teasing her again, making clear her complete lack of ability to exercise any control. "I don't know, Giovanni...tell me, please?"

His cock grew larger. Was he on the verge of coming?

"If I command you, you will put your head down on my lap, you will suck my cock, on this *gondola*. You'll deep-throat me and swallow my come."

"Yes, Giovanni."

If...

Such power contained in a single word. Here was the real romance, the real mystery of domination. The woman in the man's hands, her whole existence orbiting him, all other thoughts and fears, recessed to the periphery. Where else and in what context would she consider public sex? None. It was this man—his ability to overcome her. And yet her ability to let go hinged, paradoxically, on the knowledge that he would not, could not really do something to humiliate her in front of others.

It was between them only. A secret. One that she knew he would never violate. They would skin the edges of public revelation, but never, ever would he rob her of her pride and dignity.

"We don't want to waste this erection, though, do we, my *Carina*?"

She dropped her eyes shyly.

"I have plans for it, later on. I intend for you to worship it. I intend to nurture and sustain it in my hand as I watch you writhe beneath the whip. I will feel the silkiness of your mouth, all right, but at my leisure."

"Oh, Giovanni, if you knew what your words did to me." She dropped her head against his shoulder in a pure act of awe and devotion.

He took her hand from his erection, clutching it carefully in his own. "You will show me later, my little slave."

"Yes," she nodded, feeling at that moment as if he were her lord and master, the very source of the air she breathed.

Did she dare comply with everything tonight? Did she dare refuse? She continued to wonder this as she lay against him, the stars swirling overhead, his heartbeat lulling and exciting and seducing her. She longed to jump from the boat to swim away. But where? To freedom...or deeper into slavery.

Only the stars knew the answers. The eternal city, and her master for the night.

The hotel, which Giovanni explained was called a *pensione*, was lovely and quaint. She knew from her guidebooks that anything along the Grand Canal fetched a pretty penny. She could only assume that his art was commercially successful.

The lobby was furnished with antiques. Dark wood chairs and loveseats with red velvet upholstery, portraits of Venetian ladies and gentlemen decked out in the finery of long ago, a fine Persian rug and displays of ancient weaponry, including crossed swords and a gleaming silver halberd in the armored glove of a suit of armor, the shed skin of some stalwart knight.

The desk clerk, in an ascot and long coat and tails bowed crisply upon their entrance. Giovanni took her arm, smoothly introducing them as *Signore y Signora* Bellini-Morgan. The elegance and assertiveness of his presentation left no room in the man's mind for doubts concerning the difference in their ages or anything else.

Regan found herself clinging to him, caught up in his charismatic power. Giovanni was the sort of man who commanded respect, without, in any way, forcing his hand. For a split second she imagined the arrangement as being permanent. Mr. and Mrs. Giovanni Bellini-Morgan. She felt like a schoolgirl, scribbling in the margins of her notebook. Little hearts and arrows with made-up names inside them for imagined relationships the reality of which one can have no clue at that age.

At one point, as Giovanni was signing his name in the register, she caught the desk clerk sneaking a look at her. She felt the blood rise to her cheeks. He was making no attempt to disguise his lust. Was her arousal that obvious? The sex on them both?

"Is everything in order?" Giovanni asked pointedly, catching the exchange out of the corner of his eye.

Now it was the desk clerk's turn to feel embarrassed. "Quite all right, sir, yes. Have you any more luggage? We've already taken in two bags, from the station."

"That is all of it," Giovanni informed him. He pulled a billfold from his jacket. It was thick with high-denomination Euros. "See to it, please, that we are not disturbed."

The man took the offered bill, eyes bright with sycophantic glee. "Of course, sir."

Giovanni steered the rather dazed Regan to the elevator. "We're on the top floor," he said. "I think you'll like the view."

She was sure she would. The question was, how much time would she be spending looking outside the window?

Giovanni had booked a suite for them. Complete with a gigantic four-poster bed, a sunken Jacuzzi tub inlaid with marble and a balcony of carved red stone, worthy of a pope or prince.

"Have a look," he said, ushering her outside.

They were several stories above the Canal, which slithered like a snake below them. The lights of the city and the harbor beyond danced on the water. A faint breeze caught her hair. It smelled of the sea. "Giovanni, you should not have brought me," she whispered as he came up behind her to ask what she thought.

"And why not?" He placed his hand on the small of her back.

"Because I won't want to leave...that's why I do things the way I do. Hit and run. No attachments."

"Including men?" He spun her, gathering her in his arms.

"A lady never tells. Besides, you told me I was yours only until morning."

"Words I may live to regret."

Regan's heart quickened. His remark stirred mixed emotions. Not the least of which was fear. She'd counted on boundaries here, his boundaries. If he should start acting his age and go falling in love—or worse still, if *she* should act his age, they were going to be in for big trouble.

"I'd like you to go inside." He stroked the hair on the side of her head. "Take off all your clothes for me. Then look inside my suitcase. You will find items of interest. I want you to lay them on the bed."

"How will I know which ones?"

"It will be self-explanatory, *Carina*."

"I just don't want to get it wrong." She was stalling the inevitable and they both knew it.

He smiled, giving her a directional pat on the posterior. "Go, woman, before I carry you to the bed over my shoulder and ravish you."

His hand was like fire, permeating her skin. She skipped a step forward. It was no longer an option to be naked. She needed it now. Needed to be played with and

touched, his hands over her skin, his wicked imagination putting her through paces. She wanted to be Laura...wanted to feel all those forbidden things from the book.

She pulled her sundress over her head and tossed it onto the bed. Her skin prickled deliciously, craving attention, craving the touch of that strong young man. Why not go to him now and ask...beg...for lovemaking?

No, she had her orders. His suitcase waited. It was a small leather valise. She gripped the handle, feeling a little thrill knowing his hand had been here. It was heavy, much more so for her than it would have been for him. She laid it on the bed, upon the lovely gold and pale blue comforter, a match to the curtains and to the antique furnishings. The case had no lock. She did not know exactly what to expect, but as she lifted the top she saw quickly what he'd meant when he'd said she would know which things to take out.

The lower part contained items of clothes, secured by a mesh covering. The upper part had clear compartments. That's where the goodies were. Regan held her breath. Maybe she should have asked to see these things before...

A pair of steel handcuffs. The whip he'd spoken of—a riding crop, from the looks of it. And candles and small clamps. What on earth were those for? She opened the snaps and began taking them out one by one. The cuffs were cold in her hands. These weren't toys. They looked and felt real, like the kind the police would use. The candles were ordinary enough. White tapers. The clamps were strong, alligator clips with soft foam caps on the end. She tried one on her pinkie. It stung.

She took out the riding crop next. Slender and black, braided leather.

I'm nude, she thought, *holding a whip for a man to use...on me*. Fresh moisture collected between her legs. She needed penetration badly. The cunning fellow must have known that, too—how she'd respond to this. He was playing with her, building her anticipation.

She touched the whip to her arm, and then snapped it against her skin. Craving more, she ran it up her arm, across her collarbone, to her cheek, to her lip.

Oh, god, she was putting out her tongue...dabbing the surface, like a cat, a kitten. On impulse, she touched the tip of the crop to her left nipple. A shock ran through her. Recoiling, she dropped the whip to the bed. It belonged in his hands, not hers.

Several more items still in the suitcase caught her attention. A dildo, a black eye mask, a kind of a gag featuring a small, round rubber ball and another smaller, curved dildo. This she identified as an object to be inserted into the anus. Quickly, she took them all out, arranging them as best she could on the bed.

Lastly she took out the coils of soft, bright purple silk rope. They were cut to various segments with special knots on the ends. Presumably he knew what to do with them.

Now what, she wondered, noting the empty compartments. She'd taken out all of his toys. Was she supposed to go and find him? That sounded good to her. She didn't want to stay here with all this stuff. What would possess a man to have such a torture kit and why would he travel with it? Did he pick up women all the time?

A surge of rebellion flared. Regan didn't want to be used. She knew what men could be like. Back home she had tests for them, she was cautious. Several of them were written exams. Rique and Karma made fun of her for this—as they did with everything else in her personal life—but who were the ones with the broken hearts all the time? Them, not her.

Regan had broken all her own rules. To the extreme. What if this guy were a psycho? Did a normal person carry handcuffs? How'd he get through security with them?

"I see you've found all the tools of my art...one of my arts, at least."

She jolted. He was behind her. He placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Giovanni, I'm not sure I can go through with this..."

His hands slid down her arms. He was naked. His hard cock pressed between her buttock cheeks. "Do you want to leave?" He reached around to cup her breasts.

"You pick a fine time to ask," she gasped. "Prick."

Giovanni took hold of both nipples. "There is never a good time to end. But it is your responsibility to do so if you are not comfortable. You remember the word?"

"I do..." He was massaging her nipples, rolling them between his fingers and thumbs. "Oh, god, you don't play fair."

"No, I don't," he agreed. "My aim is your conquest, *Carina*, I make no apologies for this."

She melted against him. What woman does not dream of hearing such a thing from a handsome, strong man who is kind and funny and...wonderful?

"I don't know which I fear more," she confessed. "That I will hate this or that I will like it."

"Time will tell," he sounded, as always, like the elder of the two. "For now, we proceed, until you or I choose to stop. In the meantime, you will be pushed. Hard. You will surrender. You will submit. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Giovanni."

He squeezed harder, giving her a first taste of real pain. "You will call me Sir from here on."

"Ow! That hurts!" She squirmed.

He pinched harder. "What did you say?"

The word *rapido* flashed through her mind but did not come to her lips. She'd see this through...no matter what.

"I said it hurts, Sir."

"*Bene, Carina.*" He eased off. One hand slid to her belly, to hold it tightly, the other went between her thighs, opening her sex lips. "What are you tonight?"

"Yours, Sir."

A single finger flicked at her clitoris. "Look at the items on that bed."

"Yes, Sir." She tried to keep her breathing steady. Tried to keep her conscious thoughts collected.

"They aren't toys, *Carina*, though they are meant to bring great joy and ecstasy. They are not meant for strangers. I use them only on those I trust. Those who trust me."

"But you hardly know me," she challenged. "How do I know you don't use those on any girl you can get your hands on?"

"I have a friend in Florence. A slave. I was on my way to see her. But these doubts, they are not your real ones."

"Yes," she insisted. "They are."

He worked her with two fingers, making her writhe against his hand. At the same time, he let the heat of his hand permeate her trembling, flat belly. "No, *Carina*. What you fear is that deep down you have no control yourself. That your body will surrender to any strong man. That you will crawl to anyone with a whip."

"That's a lie!" She was trying to fight him, trying to get away, but he had her weakened, aroused body right where he wanted it.

"Is it? Try and hold back then. Show me your great resistive powers. I've insulted you and yet I am about to make you come on my hand."

"Never." She tried to kick back at him. "Do you hear me?"

Regan did her best, attempting to twist and kick and bite, but in the end he brought her off, forcing her to feel the very pleasure she wished to deny.

In an added twist of cruelty, he made her humiliate herself to achieve her needed satisfaction.

"Beg for it," he said.

"Puh...lease..." she moaned, beyond the ability to form whole words, much less sentences.

"You'll be punished after this," he told her nonchalantly. "Among other things, you have failed to call me Sir for the last several minutes."

"Sir...Sir...please, Sir." She fell against the hard muscles of his enveloping male form. She felt so safe with him, it was true, and there was trust here, though she could not understand why. They'd known each other only a matter of hours.

"Yes, *Carina*..." His voice sank to the depths of her soul, deliciously raspy, deceptively smooth, like the strong coffee of this country. It sparked things in her, brought things to life. Truly spoke to her as nothing else ever had. He made her feel so special, his pretty one. His *Carina*. A sudden stab of jealousy overtook her. Who was this woman in Florence? This slave?

She moaned softly, craning her neck, wanting the touch of her cheek against his chin. His jaw was stubbly, a day's growth of beard covered his face. He smelled of his cologne, and also of the magical city.

Rising to tiptoe, digging into the carpet, she braced herself. The orgasm came quickly, cleanly, feeling more like an overture than a finale. Immediately she was hungry for more, the initial waves only increasing her thirst. If he'd intended to open her like this, to ready her for more devious play, more devious teasing, he'd done his job well.

"You are magnificent," he said to her, ill-disguised awe in his voice. "How can it be that no one has stolen you before this?"

"I'm guarded prettily heavily...Sir."

Giovanni put his fingers to her lips. For a moment she resisted. "Giovanni, no, I don't like that."

He gave her ass a firm smack. "This is the nectar of the heavens," he chided. "You ought to enjoy it as much as do your male lovers."

She didn't have the heart to tell him what few male lovers she'd had were more concerned with going for the remote control to watch their favorite show during sex than they were in going for her G-spot.

A second swat helped her break through her resistance.

"Savor it," he ordered.

She felt that hot, weak feeling. He was making her do this, compelling her to feel. Instantly, she calmed. He let her lick at his fingers until they were clean.

"On the bed, *Carina*. On all fours."

Regan obeyed, crawling up onto the huge comforter. She was careful as she did so to avoid stepping on any of Giovanni's tools. It was a provocative position she was assuming, on hands and knees, her sex completely vulnerable.

"Lift your head," he ordered.

Giovanni slipped the sleep mask over her head. He took a long time, pulling her hair delicately out of the way of the string. This simple act of consideration made her heart clench. Giovanni was special...really special.

"I am your eyes now, *Carina*. Follow my voice. Sense...with every part of your body. Become...what you dream of."

Her body writhed at his very first touch—unknown, unexpected—along her spinal column. He traced a line to the base, to the cleft of her ass cheeks. It was like another orgasm, in the central nervous system.

"Bondage is two things," he explained. "It is the actuality and the potential. The potential is always far greater. The mind is where it begins and ends."

"Sir...god..." she cried as he grazed her pussy lips, touched her nipple and slapped her ass in that order.

"You are not tied," he reminded her. "Though you could be. And maybe you will be. You saw the ropes? The cuffs? Strong stuff. But my will is stronger, isn't it? I forbid you to move, *Carina*. There is your bond, stronger than steel. I forbid you to leave this position without permission, is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir." She felt it, she did. The invisible force descending upon her. But also the temptation, to resist, to refuse...and the anticipation of what would be next.

"Laura is a proud woman," Giovanni said, deciding to share more of the plot with her. "She does not wish to beg, she wishes to enjoy her pain without sacrifice. But she finds no happiness, hiring men to beat and abuse her. Finally she meets Roger. He teaches her that she must give herself mentally first. He will not even touch her until she goes to him. On her belly. She crawls, *Carina*, naked, to his feet. Then and only then does he deign to whip her."

Regan tried to imagine herself as that proud heroine on the cover of the book. Surrendering to her deep, dark, irrational desires.

"The book is fun. Play is fun. But life is more...complicated."

Regan gave a tiny shriek. Something had rubbed across the sole of her foot.

"You will not cry out," he warned. "Or I will have to gag you."

She gritted her teeth. A moment later she felt it again much more distinct. A tap. Then another. Stinging.

He was using the whip.

"Not that," she protested.

Giovanni took her by the back of her hair. "I can't imagine you've ever had a ball gag in your mouth." He leaned in to make his voice all the more potent to her hearing. "It isn't always pleasant. Some women enjoy the control it gives the man. She cannot articulate. It's quite degrading. She cannot swallow, she drools like a dog. I've known women who beg for it. Others who despise it. The choice is yours."

"I-I'll be quiet, Sir," she said.

Giovanni released her and returned to his work. Torturing her poor little soles. Five stinging slaps to each. More than anything it was mental. A demeaning punishment, sexual and degrading.

"I am going to whip your ass next. You'll wear the plug at the same time."

She clawed at the comforter, desperate to feel the material, to make up somehow for the lack of her eyesight. He was telling her – *telling* her – what things he intended to do,

uncomfortable things, and she was being given no option but to be quiet about it. Unless she wanted to be gagged. Made to drool like a dog.

Wasn't she one already, then? A pet being used as he saw fit.

Any real outrage she might have felt was countered with desire. It wasn't the things that turned her on, but the power and the man behind it. What was it that turned her on so much about a man who would go that far, who would exercise his primal urge to possess to the extreme, that so fueled her libido?

"Have you been used anally before, *Carina*?"

Used...the word sent a tremor through her. "I'm a virgin," she informed him.

The whip whistled through the air. The crack of doom. She cried out as it landed with utter surprise and explosive force on her behind.

"That was not the question I asked," he said, overlooking for the moment that she'd failed to remain silent.

The pain of the whip was unlike anything she'd ever felt. It was like an ongoing blistering volcano, bubbling throughout her posterior. Under the circumstances, it was a little hard to rack her brain and figure what he meant.

"I'm waiting."

The whip landed again and this time she restrained herself to carefully controlled whimpers. In the midst of this second overlapping explosion, her mind grew suddenly clear.

She knew what he was after by phrasing the question as he had. He was seeking to lead her into confession. Into verbal humiliation.

"No, Sir, I've never been used anally."

"You've never had a cock up your tight little ass?"

"No, Sir," she replied quickly, proving she was capable of learning from her errors. "I've never had a cock up my tight little ass."

"You've imagined it, though?" He ran the tip down the crack.

"Yes." She dared not lie. "I have, Sir."

"You've dreamed of being overcome," he speculated.

"Yes, Sir. Men having their way. Strong men using my asshole and giving me no choice."

"Dreams are tricky things, aren't they?" he mused. "Double-edged swords. So easily turned into nightmares."

She gasped as he placed the plug at the entrance to her anus. "Sir?"

"No nightmares, tonight, *Carina*," he soothed. "Only dreams...dirty ones."

She nodded. God, this man was so much what she needed now.

"Are you ready for the next step?"

"Yes, Sir." For the moment at least, she felt confident.

He laughed lightly, pride in his voice. "My eager *Carina*."

She couldn't help but feel pleased. It was important what he thought of her, though she wasn't sure why.

"Open, *Carina*," he told her now.

Regan proffered her ass for unknown sensations. Giovanni took the plug away for the moment. The lotion was cool and smooth inside of her. He ordered her to relax and then a moment later he put back the plug, well-lubricated now.

"All the way, *Carina*."

She tightened at first, fearing the penetration, but then he worked at her pussy with his hand. A few soft words, and something gave way inside her. The butt plug went all the way in.

"*Molto bene*," he praised.

It was twice as sexy to hear his pleasure in her recited in Italian. Coyly, she wiggled her behind at him. He laughed, stepping for a moment out of character as the stern, all-knowing Dominant.

"Delightful, *Carina*, bravo," he exclaimed.

It was back to business, though, as he began tapping her ass with the whip. She arched her back as he rubbed at the sore spots. Welts. He'd raised welts on her already. Now there was a fine souvenir of her time in Venice. Not exactly something to display on her knickknack shelf in her office.

A light blow fell on the meaty part of her left flank. "You are so lovely, a work of art. Perhaps I should share you. Fetch bellhops and porters to fuck you while I watch. Sitting in a chair, slowly stroking my cock, enjoying every last second of your steamy degradation, your every opening penetrated by strangers, orgasm after orgasm, your eyes on me, your passion, only for me."

He lashed her again, letting the image sink in.

"We'd find all manner of men to use you, the better to teach you submission. Roger was good at that sort of thing. As was I, at least with Anna. With you..." His voice trailed off as he found a rhythm, a light tattoo, the pain of each stroke blending with the pleasure of alternating strokes to her pussy.

It was confusing. The line was growing indistinct. The pressure in her anus only reinforced this. Such an alien invader, encouraging, forcing, and inviting her to open new pathways to her neurons. Was it possible to come this way?

"With you," he was attempting again to complete the thought. "I do not think I could share. Not another man, not even one, not to touch you or look at you. Only me. See what a poor Master I would make for you? Spoiling you already. You'd have me wrapped around your little finger in a day, wouldn't you?"

Regan could think of worse things.

All at once the whip was gone, and Giovanni was there to take its place, his hands on her hips, his thighs against the backs of hers, his cock pushing between her pink, pulsing lips. He moved with a smooth excellence, artistic and inspiring that left her breathless. Talk about an artist. This wasn't mere lovemaking, but love creating. Her elbows felt so weak. Down she went, her cheek to the bedspread.

All the better to offer up her sex, to give him the angle he needed for his thrusts. He was talking to her now and she strained to hear every word through the haze of her own ecstasy.

"No one," he swore. "No one has ever affected me this way."

She felt the same, though she didn't dare to say it.

"What is it?" he wanted to know. "What have we found?"

You're the expert on everything, you tell me, she was tempted to say. But that was her sarcastic side. He'd broken through that layer to about a dozen more, including some she wasn't sure she fully understood, much less felt able to explain it to someone else.

Those were his last words on the subject. What followed were the cries of a man in bliss. A man climaxing with a woman. Contradicting his earlier injunction to silence, he now encouraged her to cry out with him. She wished he'd make up his mind. Maybe it was that odd combination in him of English and Italian. Stiff and buttoned down on the one hand, emotive and operatic on the other. She could only imagine the sort of sexual act between his mother and father that had produced him.

At the last second, he withdrew. Offering no heads up, he flipped them, rolling onto his back, putting her on top of him. Still blindfolded, she found herself mounted on his erection, already slick and ready with her juices.

"I want to see," she complained.

He tore the mask off her, allowing her to see the semi-bronzed, wild-eyed youth beneath her. He was literally pulsing with virility, his pectorals tight, his biceps taut, and veins emergent in all the right places. *He must exercise*, she thought, somewhere.

Digging her palms in, she reveled in his chest. He had a fine layer of hair, black as the curls on his head. He had the same hair at the base of his cock, tickling against her clean-shaven mons. Up and down, she lifted herself, grateful for some measure of control. But he was not giving up on being in charge completely. It was still his arms and hands determining the speed as he kept that ever-present grip on her hips. The power was still his, regardless of position.

From the look in his eyes, she had the distinct impression that he'd put her up there to better admire, enjoy and use her. She ought to hate that, on principle, but it turned her on, just as did every other thing that came from this man. He must have sensed that ambivalence, because he was smiling, broadly, the way he did whenever he was battling her and winning.

"You're not as tough as all that," she informed him.

His brow rose. "Hands behind your head," he ordered, not bothering to slow his pace.

She frowned but did as she was told.

"Keep moving," he said, transferring his hands to her breasts.

Giovanni was sinister all right. Now he was free to play with her nipples while she could do nothing to stop him. On top of that she had to do all the work of being fucked.

"You aren't a nice man, sometimes," she told him.

"Later," he said, cupping her full, round globes, "I will tie you in ropes. Make your breasts stand out, crisscrossing them, binding them. It'll drive you crazy, *Carina*."

"There will be...no...later."

He laughed at her, dripping sweat, riding his cock, totally at his mercy. "It's a long time to dawn, and trust me, we won't waste even a minute on sleep."

"Grrr," she growled. "Why won't you just come already?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm good for two more times, easy."

"I might have known," she sighed.

"You, on the other hand...there's no limit to how many orgasms we can put you through."

"Just tell me that Laura survives," she groaned. "In the book?"

"Roger sells her. To Arab slave traders."

"Good. Can we do that now? I think it would be easier than this."

Giovanni lifted her clean off of him, flipping them once again.

“What am I? A frigging flapjack?”

“A what?” The American term appeared to elude him.

“Never mind...”

He had her on her back, poised for penetration. This time he wanted in deeper, though. Grasping both her feet, he pushed her knees against her chest. She was spread wide, dripping and pretty darn desperate.

“Never mind what? The sex?”

“No, please, Giovanni. You know what I mean.” She hated herself for whining, and hated even more that he could do this to her.

“You are so cute this way,” he said lovingly.

“Go fuck yourself,” said the suddenly not very submissive Regan.

He fucked her instead. Pummeled her, pile-driving his cock so deep and hard and fast that she thought she would end up clean through the mattress. She clung to him, completely and totally his.

“More...” she managed to whisper.

“More, *what?*” he queried.

Regan drew a blank. She’d be damned if *she* knew. Oh, wait—she’d been forgetting to call him sir. “More, Sir,” she offered with proper conciliation.

“I am not certain of your sincerity,” he lamented.

Regan put her heart—and loins into it this time. “I mean it...please, Sir, I need it...badly.”

“Very well.” Giovanni ended her misery, repeating the impalement. Oh, yeah, he was the fucking man all right. Seats up, fasten seat belts...get ready for landing. Or was it takeoff?

Giovanni went to work, a study in pure optimal coital physics. Maximum force without a bit of harm or injury. Optimum pleasure and delicious pressure, a pure equation of bliss. Finally, he too was sweating, at last so caught up in the thing that he

couldn't stand outside and narrate, tease, or lord it over her. She had him, as much as he had her.

In the end they clung, as they had in the Piazza, only this time with the freedom and abandon of repeated intimacy. Not to mention the freer expression possible behind closed doors. He was breathing tightly. She delighted in the look on his face. She wanted it to be the best he'd ever had, better than with that stupid slave in Florence, better than with the mysterious Anna Paulina, or any of the others who undoubtedly had thrown themselves at him in his young life.

It wasn't just her vanity. She didn't care that he was so hot and that his picking her raised her status—it was about him, specifically. Really wanting to please him.

She clung to him as he came. She was coming, too, in perfect rhythm, in sweet harmony.

"Yes, yes, si, si," she could hear him saying, his two languages coexisting in one body. Two ways of viewing the world in one soul. Oh, if only she could know more about what made him tick...

"*Carina.*" He nibbled at her neck in the afterglow. Regan lay limp, imagining herself on the floor of a lush rain-soaked valley, at the bottom of a waterfall they'd just ridden. Drops of rain, dripping down from the glossy green leaves, sounds of birds and insects, friendly teeming life. Eden all over again. Done the right way.

"*Mia Carina,*" he murmured. "*Per il notte.*"

His sweetheart, he was saying. For this night.

What a delicious way to learn a second language, she thought, congratulating herself at her ready translation.

"It's time for the ropes," he announced, with soft kisses to her breasts. "Are you ready?"

Her wrists popped up, already crossed. "Twist my arm," she teased, a rather large grin on her glowing face.

"It won't be your arm I twist," he teased back, taking hold of her nipple.

"Yes, Sir," she gritted her teeth, in expectation of the pain.

"Spread your legs, *Carina*."

Regan obeyed, spreading them wide for inspection.

"You have the most beautiful pussy I've ever seen, do you know that?"

"Thank you, Sir."

He gave her mons a little slap, sharp, electric, wicked.

"Sit up," he commanded.

She complied, keeping her legs as separated as she could while following his instructions. He went behind her back and told her to put her hands over her head. She felt more naked this way, as though a new level of vulnerability had been reached. He nuzzled her neck as he gathered the first coil about her torso, just above her belly button.

"Your breasts are phenomenal, *Carina*. I would like your permission to whip them."

A tiny orgasm, an aftershock, rippled through her oversensitized body. Why would he do that? Why ask permission now, after all he'd done?

"They are already yours, Sir," she reminded, her body undulating as he crisscrossed the ropes between her breasts and over her shoulders.

"Nevertheless, I want the words. From your mouth."

Begging, she thought, would be easier somehow, than this. Asking. Inviting. Her own punishment. And of a sort she could scarcely imagine.

"I...give you permission," she whispered as he continued winding the ropes about her nude body.

"Permission for what?" he pressed, allowing her no quarter.

"Permission...to whip..." came the words through dried lips, the air in her lungs barely supporting them. "My...breasts."

"Get on your knees, *Carina*."

She did as ordered, putting herself in the middle of the bed. He loomed over her with the whip. Already his cock was half-hard.

"Take your breasts in your hands," he said. "Hold them up to me."

Her heart slammed in her chest. Did he realize what he was asking? How did he expect a person to participate like this in her own torture?

"Giovanni, Sir..."

He lashed her thigh, a swift, sizzling blow. "Hold up your breasts, now, *Carina*."

There was only iron in his voice. The very tone of it made her cream all over again. "Yes, Sir."

"I want the nipples," he said.

She whimpered helplessly, angling the proffered globes. Immediately, he struck a needling little sting to her left nipple.

Her shriek was instinctive, as was her move to duck her head and wrap herself with her arms. "No more," she pleaded.

"Resume your position, *Carina*."

"No." She shook her head piteously. "No. No."

His whip went beneath her chin, lifting. "Obedience, *Carina*," he reminded.

Her arms dropped from protective mode, back to offertory position. He rewarded her with a series of hard blows, across both nipples specifically and then across her breasts in general. He did not relent, even as tears began to form.

This is crazy, she thought, I could stop this. I can use the safe word and it will all be over. He's watching for it, I can tell. But until I use it, he will keep going.

And that was what she wanted. Because behind this wall of refreshed agony, was deeper pleasure. An intimacy she would never find any other way in her life, and perhaps not with any other man.

"I wish you could see," he declared, "how good you look to me now. Your hair all tousled. Your eyes full of wonder...your body flush and mottled, so...pure and innocent."

She wished she could see through his eyes. She was pleasing him. That much she knew and that made her happy.

"I'm going to tie you down," he said. "And drive you insane with desire."

Giovanni ran the whip across her soft belly. Unconsciously, she leaned forward. Did she want his caress or...more pain?

"Lie back," he told her.

Regan lifted herself off her behind, breasts straining. She could scarcely move or think. He was so close to her, surrounding her. Her source of light, of being.

"Now the fun part," he crooned, securing her left wrist. He used one of the smaller segments of rope, attaching it to the head of the bed. Lightly tickling her palm, he made sure she felt the shiver of her newfound captivity.

"The other wrist next," he said. His touch was gentle but firm. His technique was expert and once again she was assured she would not escape his clutches.

As if she could wish to be anywhere else in the world right now.

Giovanni traced a line down her arms. "Captivity of the limbs," he said, "brings with it freedom of the mind. As you shall soon discover."

She contemplated the meaning of his words as he nudged her thighs apart. He had plans to secure her ankles, each to a corner of the bed. Again, he took care to cause no undue stress. He left her just enough room to squirm a little but not enough to prevent him doing to her according to his whims.

"I'm going to clamp your nipples, *Carina*," he said, clear satisfaction in his voice. "And then I will begin your true initiation."

Initiation into what, she wondered. Hadn't he dragged her in plenty deep already?

"Your pussy is still hungry, isn't it?"

She nodded, sighing a ragged breath as he ran a finger over her opening, just enough to fan the flames of blatant lust. "Nnn..."

"Well, it's going to get lots hungrier," he laughed.

She gasped as he touched one of the metal clamps to her pussy. "Sometimes these are used on the labia," he told her.

Regan stiffened. Surely he wouldn't...

"For a beginner like you, we'll stick to the easier stuff."

She watched the clamp with rapt attention as he moved it over her left nipple with a flourish.

"You have to know how to use these, *Carina*. Or you can cause the wrong kind of pain." He opened the clip. Her nipple was so swollen—she willed it to stop responding. Such a tempting little target it made.

"It's coming, *Carina*. Accept it," he advised. "Don't fight."

With a hand as steady as a surgeon, Giovanni took hold of her nipple and fitted the clamp over it. "Submit," he commanded. "Surrender...to the sensations."

Pain. A world of pain, biting down and digging in. Not letting go, like something gnawing and eating at the heart of her.

"Yes, that's it," he encouraged. "Let it in."

As if she could keep it out.

"Feel how hard that makes me." He rubbed his cock against her leg.

"Giovanni...put it in me...fuck me."

"No, *Carina*. We have long to go." He attached the second clamp, without warning. To offset the pressure, he dipped his finger into her spasming pussy.

She bucked at once, pulling at the ropes with all her strength.

"Lie still," he ordered.

Regan sought to comply. "H-hurts," she managed to communicate.

"It changes," he said. "From a sharp pain to a dull ache, then...bliss."

She thrashed. She'd never make it.

"So beautiful," he said. Then in Italian, "*Che bella.*"

Giovanni was kissing her stomach, his lips and tongue tickling her belly button. He was working with a purpose, traveling lower. Oh, god, he was going *there*...

The kisses moved to the apex of her thighs. He dabbed his tongue at the hopelessly wet surface. Tiny groans of pleasure escaped his throat. Yet another aphrodisiac for Regan. It was so rare in her experience to find a man who truly enjoyed orally pleasuring a woman, and still rarer to find one with real skill. She herself was afraid to ask. But things were not up to her now. If this was what he wanted, to drive her crazy with desire, as he put it, then that's what would happen.

"Right to the edge, *Carina.*" Parting her with his tongue, he went to work on her clit. The very minutest of stimulations. Such an articulate tongue, speaking in Italian and English, singing and wooing, at last communicating the deepest things in his eyes. On and on, each time dancing her to the heights, promising to push her over the top, only to hold her back. She could scarcely separate the places on her body, the clamping and the kissing, the soft tickling and the biting.

The clenching and unclenching of her damp fists, hips twisting, her mouth calling out his name, sounding like someone else's voice, and her ears, hearing his sweet, perverse encouragements. Thrashing, heaven and hell, begging, screaming, and demanding.

How long? Five minutes? A year?

At last the explosions came, like fireworks, from every corner of the sky, too much for words. Giovanni was right. In this captivity came the ultimate freedom, to yield to it all, to blossom in fire and rain. She wanted him coming with her, inside her, over her. He was there, but not penetrating. A deep smile on his face, he began stroking himself. Masturbating over her body.

Greedily, she moaned for it, anticipating his hot semen on her body—her bound, captive body, her richly loved, totally fucked and transported body. Transported from this reality to another.

She called out his name. Was he still touching her? His hand was on his cock. His lovely, pulsing shaft. His face was angelic, carved from the living stone of the gods. He was everything that was gorgeous and holy and perfect.

"Carina." The word rolled off his tongue, trilling with his coming. He bathed her in his warm emission, across her throbbing, contained breasts, between the ropes—gobs of it—on her chest, her neck, her cheeks, even her hair.

"Carina," he repeated again and again 'til at last he fell on top of her and they were one, their bodies fitting, melding, heat to heat, skin to skin, tiny kisses and sighs until everything faded to the sound of softly beating hearts.

At some point she remembered him untying her, kissing all the places the ropes had held her. And taking off the clamps. He warned her it would hurt as he took them off and that she should grip his hand. She liked that, holding his hand tightly and seeing the care in his eyes.

"I never had to use the word," she murmured.

"Yes, *Carina*," he stroked her hair. "You did well."

When all the sex toys were gone, he brought a warm, wet cloth to clean her. Dabbing lightly, he restored her skin to a clean, pinkish glow. She felt so incredibly spoiled, like a princess.

"Is this a part of domination?" she asked, surprised that he should become such a devoted servant.

"When it is done right, yes," he told her.

When he was done he tucked her in and kissed her forehead. Her heart felt the stab of a knife, cutting unexpectedly. He intended to leave her.

"It's not dawn yet," she said, trying to hold him. He didn't want to stay. She had to plead, using her sleepy feminine wiles.

"Lie with me...just a moment." She was so close to unconsciousness that it was a final act of will on her part. A smile crept across her face as she felt the mattress weigh down beside her. A strong arm folded across her body.

"Only a few minutes," he told her.

Yes, and then he would leave. She pushed her buttocks back against him, snuggling in. She'd make those few minutes last, she'd stretch them into a place of the beyond, a place of dreaming. A place of happiness. Outside the pale of her regular, boring, practical life.

A few minutes...which she in turn would cherish for a lifetime.

Chapter Four

Giovanni stirred at the feel of Regan's breath on his chest. He lifted his eyelids, quickly comprehending the colossal error he'd made. He'd fallen asleep with her, here in the room. It was past dawn. The sun was already shining in brightly, welcoming a new day. Outside the city of Venice was garnering itself for yet another rush of activity, tourism, commerce, scholarship, indolence, crime and heroism. The full gamut of human capability. Including love. The most deadly enterprise of all. His parents had carefully avoided it, and thereby enjoyed successful careers. They'd passed this ethic on and it had been reinforced in his travels. Mercurio had applauded this, suggesting ways to free his higher spirit even more.

Personally, he liked sex. With different women. Was that so bad at his age? He liked to paint pictures, too. And when one was finished, he moved to another. No crime in that. It was quite sensible in fact. If a man stayed at one canvas forever, he'd end up with a mess, too many layers, dissolving to an ugly brown and eventually pure black.

This is why he had rules. Don't sleep with women. Fuck, yes, make love, all the better. But no sleeping. Have them until dawn, and move on. Unless there were clear lines, as with Francesca in Florence, or Anna Paulina.

This Regan had actually worn him out. Not only that, she'd made him feel so peaceful, he'd dozed right off. He was supposed to have said his goodbyes at sunrise, leaving her the room for as long as she wished to stay.

Whose idea was it to lie back down in the bed? It couldn't have been his, could it?

Rolling the woman gently onto her back, he tried to recall the sequence of events. Thinking, as always, was difficult in her presence. Her body was soft and warm and beckoning. She was sexier in her sleep than when she was awake, if that was possible. Damn—he was hard for her again. How many erections did that make?

He covered her with the sheet. Any more time looking at those softly rising and falling breasts, that gently quivering belly, so lusciously white and smooth and he would be on her again, waking her with his cock between her legs. Yes, that would be heaven—feeling the silky warmth of her womanhood, catching that look in her eyes, the wonder and astonishment of being had again, but he could not afford this.

There would be complications. You only got so many fucks with a woman before you moved from one-night stand to relationship. A wise man knew just how many he could get away with. Or so his old rugby mate Brian was fond of telling him. Giovanni's gut told him that one more act of intimacy would push them over the brink. After that, it would be awkward, as the inevitable goodbye became a hundred times harder.

Such a torment he could never bear. As it was, with every passing second, he became more consumed with the desire to have her again. The way she'd responded to him, the way she'd moaned and come and come again. The way she begged, so sweet and hot for everything he did. The way she had looked confined in his ropes, the silken cord gathered crisscrossed above and below her breasts, her back arched as she lifted her conquered bosom. Clenching his fists, he reviewed it all in his mind. It had been a blur, all of it, much too fast. The whip upon her heaving breasts. The clamps. His tongue between her legs, delivering her into the arms of pleasure upon pleasure.

Where had the night disappeared to? Too much time with his tongue between her legs, he mused, that was part of the trouble. It's just that her taste had been so delectable. Her soft sex liquefying so fragrantly in his mouth. He could taste her even now.

Perhaps just one more time with her wouldn't hurt things any...

No, he had to employ his willpower. Regan was the kind of woman a man fell into and never found his way out of again. And he'd be the luckiest man in the world to be trapped like that, too. He'd wager anything that there was someone waiting back home in the States. A man to marry her and give her the practical sort of life she needed.

Giovanni found his clothes, turning his back, literally, on temptation. He debated leaving her a note but finally decided against it. Any words he might offer would only insult what they'd had. As for any hard feelings at being seduced by him—there were no apologies big enough to cover.

Best to make a quick and quiet exit from her life forever. He'd pay for the room, and see to it that anything else she desired would be provided at his expense for the remainder of her stay. High-speed hit-and-run so she could catch every sight. He smiled, thinking of her diligently checking items off in her little book.

That was the strangest part of this whole thing for Giovanni. It wasn't just her sexuality that intrigued him, but every little detail. She made him laugh as much as she made him crazy with desire. It reminded him of how his father felt for his mother. All the emotions that were so hard for him to ever show. Giovanni dared not assign a word to such feelings himself. If he did it would be like naming a demon. One that might haunt him for the rest of his days. After a brief stop at the front desk to tend to his business, he headed back to the train station. For the *rapido* to Florence. Where he would begin the arduous task of forgetting what had just been the greatest night of his life.

* * * * *

Regan awoke to the feel of sunshine on her face. It was warm and soft, almost palpable. Rolling to her back she sighed, lazy, stretching her limbs like a cat, luxuriating in her femaleness. She'd never felt so full and rich, so well-loved. Reaching for the pillow beside her she found it empty.

Giovanni.

Where had he gone? Regan sat up with a start, calling out the name of the beautiful man who had been the best lover she'd ever had. Three times she repeated it before she remembered his words.

He'd intended to be gone by morning. He would lie with her a little while and, then he'd vanish. She tossed aside the sheet and ran to the door. Opening it, she called for him. A little man with a handlebar mustache popped his head out three doors down.

"Mind your own business," she told him, quite unfairly.

She slammed the door shut and ran to the balcony. Foolishly she looked at the cobblestone sidewalk below, at the milling tourist crowd. As if he would be there, waiting to wave up at her. He wasn't on the Bridge of Sighs, either, leaning over the fabulous carved marble. Nor was he in a gondola or swimming in a life preserver down the Canal. Likewise hanging from a hook off of some cloud all set to shout, "Surprise, I really didn't leave you at all."

Regan ran back to the bed and threw herself down face-first. It had been a very long time since she'd cried over a man and she didn't know why she was doing so now. What did Giovanni matter with his one night of smoke and mirrors? Tell her body that, though—it ached from the absence of his touch. And tell her heart—it had suddenly gone from happily content alone to an eerie sense of loneliness.

If only he'd stayed just the morning. For one last lazy screw followed by strong Italian coffee and flaky hard rolls on the balcony. They could have talked about their lives and dreams and she could have felt him inside of her, his semen leaking deliciously from her. He'd have worn a robe, open just enough to see his chest and the sun would have sparkled off his noble cheeks, accentuating his noble Roman nose. And her eyes would have drunk in the sight of all that masculine flesh, sleek and muscular, and she'd have felt wet and eager, yearning to go to him on her knees, begging for just one more time together.

Regan sighed. Face it, girlfriend, there never would be a last time with that man. He was like a potato chip, a cigarette, with just enough lure to lead you to the next fix. He was an appetite you'd never quite quench. A great vacation story is what he was. A helluva coup for her journal. One handsome, Italian stranger, seduced along the Grand

Venetian Canal. Every woman back home within a hundred mile radius would toast her.

Sure, she was a notch on his belt. But he was one on hers, too.

She just had to buy a belt first.

Pulling herself together, she formulated her plan for the day. She'd catch the train up to Milan. Stop at La Scala and the main cathedral of the city, both of which, happily, were located in the same plaza. There was a huge shopping plaza there, too. The stunning world-renowned Galleria di Vittorio Emmanuelle, named for Italy's first king. She could check all these behemoths off, get a good night's sleep and be on the plane back home the next morning.

Talk about a perfect trip. Rique and Karma would die of jealousy. She'd just leave out that little part about nearly having her heart stolen along the way.

* * * * *

For the second time Giovanni's travel plans were diverted at the last second. This time it was not Regan herself who changed his destination, but her name on a business card. He was reaching in the pocket of his jacket for his wallet when he found it. It must have fallen out of her passport, he thought.

"Signore," complained the ticket seller behind the counter. *"A dove andare?"*

He snapped out of his reverie. He'd been staring at the card, not even realizing it was his turn to buy a ticket. The information stunned him, largely because it made the woman real, with a home, a job, and a tangible existence.

Regan O'Connell.

Manager and Curator.

Reuben and Sons Gallery.

158 No. East Ave.

There was a phone number as well, and a fax number. He could, if he wished, contact her. That in itself—being gifted with such an opportunity—could easily cause a man to alter his life path. But there was more to it. She was in charge of an art gallery. A prominent one. He'd actually met this man Reuben a year or so ago in London. He'd wanted Giovanni to exhibit his work, but Giovanni had refused. Fame and fortune were not his aims in painting his native landscape and its people. He wanted art to celebrate and serve. He'd given away most of his work and would continue to do so.

No, Giovanni was not an exhibitor, nor a cultivator of the favor of rich collectors. But what if he had a different reason for working with Reuben's Gallery, one known only to him? Suppose he used it as an opportunity to put himself in contact with Regan again?

Just to see the look on her face would make it all worthwhile.

Where would it lead? He could not say. He only knew that this was fate. Being half-Italian, he had in him the blood of the ancient Romans, the most superstitious people to ever walk the earth. The legions had been known to postpone huge battles based on the results found in goat entrails. Whole invasions might be postponed based on the unexpected flight of an eagle.

Finding Regan's card meant that he must pursue her. One night alone was not enough.

A second time the agent asked him what ticket he wanted.

"To Rome," he told him. "One-way."

On the way he would contact Mr. Reuben and make arrangements for a show. He would tend to things in his studio in Rome and in due course he would fly from there to the United States of America to meet Signorina Regan, his *Carina*, a second time.

Chapter Five

Regan's hope for a few minutes of peace and quiet to begin her first day back were shattered the moment she entered the double glass doors of the gallery. It was barely seven but they were both there already, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, the Dynamic Duo.

"Kar-ma," trilled Rique up over the postmodern glass balcony. "She's here. Get out the toenail pullers and the rack, it's interrogation time."

Karma bounded up to the railing. Nineteen years worth of sheer exuberance. "Regan...omigod, was it to die for?" She leaned over the edge, clutching with bubblegum pink fingernails. "Europe is like sooo beautiful."

"Never mind that, honey," chided Rique, dressed all in black with tight trousers tucked into calfskin boots and an equally tight, sleeveless shirt. "Give us the dirt. Tell us about all the hot honeys with their six-packs, and I don't mean no stinking beer."

Rique emphasized his pun with a blatantly bent wrist. As far as being gay went, there was out of the closet, and then there was out of the entire house.

Karma was charging down the circular, plexiglass staircase. She was wearing a white blouse and a long, flouncy skirt. Already she'd managed to part with her footwear.

"Come on, boss lady," Rique said, both of them tugging her arms toward her office. "Time for you to give it up."

"Why is it," noted Regan, "that under normal circumstances I'm lucky if you show up a half hour late for work, but every time I have something I'd like to keep to myself you're here an hour early to pump me for information?"

"It's because we love you so much." Rique plopped her in her leather chair.

Karma, her long blonde hair streaked with pink—evidently the color of the week—thrust a magically appearing cup of coffee into her hands. “So did you get laid?”

Regan frowned. “Young lady—” she noted the ten gaily painted toes digging into her rug. “I thought we had a discussion about footwear?”

“Sorry, I forgot them upstairs. Anyway, it’s not working hours yet,” Karma tossed her perfectly straight hair, which was forever obscuring at least half of her cherubic face. It so happened that this young woman was a genius, an art student at the university, with incredible promise both as a painter and an art scholar. So long as Regan kept her on track and focused on the real world.

As for Rique, he was a sculptor, when he felt like it, and the rest of the time the best upfront, customer relations person in the business.

“You’re changing the subject.” Rique waved a slender finger. His deep brown eyes smoldered with mischief. “We were talking about your overseas affairs.”

“You were talking about them,” she reminded. “I was trying to have a discussion about work. You know, that funny thing we do when we’re here every day that keeps a roof over everyone’s head?”

Rique squinted. He was using that blasted radar of his.

“What?” Karma squeaked, grabbing at his well-toned forearm. “Tell me.”

Rique muttered something in his native Spanish. “*Dios Mio*, it happened...”

Karma gasped. “You mean...”

“She got laid,” he nodded somberly.

“Oh, that is *sooo* cool Regan,” Karma congratulated. “I’m proud of you.”

As always, she was not getting a word in edgewise. “I went to Europe to sightsee and that’s all there was to it. Now will you two please go and do something productive?”

“I’ll bet he was French.” Rique rubbed his chin. “Pierre maybe, or Louis?”

"Was he French?" Karma asked, her eyes lit up like Christmas. "French guys are way hot in bed."

Regan, just old enough to still be shocked by the mores of the youngest adults, raised a stern eyebrow. "And how would you know that?"

Rique snorted. "Where have you been living? *Little House on the Prairie*? Honey, *everyone* knows French guys are way hot in bed."

Regan sighed. As usual they were double-teaming her. "No. I didn't sleep with anyone in the entire nation of France. Are you satisfied?"

"What about Germany?" Karma asked.

"Portugal?" Rique guessed.

"Ireland?"

"Wait...England," cried Karma who was making a game show of it. "I guess England."

It wasn't for nothing that her hippie parents had given her such an "out there" name. She managed to live up to it every day.

Regan threw up her hands. "It was Italy. Now will you leave me alone?"

She should have known better. Giving them a country was like offering a shark a small taste of blood and hoping it would go away.

"An Italian." Rique applauded. "Bravo, girlfriend. You can't do better than a spicy Italian man."

"Are Italians hot in bed?" Karma wanted to know.

"Honey, Italian men wrote the book," Rique assured her.

"Regan, tell us everything. Please? Pretty please?"

Within a very few seconds Karma's request would grow high-pitched and she'd be crossing that fine line into the territory of whining.

"Pretty, pretty please..." Rique chimed in, trying to outdo her.

"You two are pathetic," Regan informed them. "Have you no sex lives of your own?"

"Other people's are more interesting," said Rique.

"And safer," added Karma. "Besides—"

"I know," she cut the young woman off. "You guys love me."

And so it was that Regan found herself cornered, but in the nicest way. Taking a few bracing gulps of the now lukewarm coffee she began to narrate her story. It sounded like someone else's as she described it. More like a page from someone's novel than a real-life account. Could it be that she had dreamed the whole thing up? Many times she had asked herself what it all meant and why she had been given such a powerful experience as a one-time thing. Was she being prepared for something else in her life, for someone who would reap the rewards of the new and more open Regan? The irony was that she'd be far less likely to trust a man now. She'd see through their façades, their carefully scripted games.

Men like Giovanni wanted one thing from a woman and once they had it they moved on. Such was life. School of hard knocks, that's what her dad called it. You want to cry? Go ahead, get it all out, but then you damn well better wipe your nose get up and come out swinging by the next round.

This was her next round. Life moving on.

"Did you get his picture?" Karma wanted to know after Regan had gotten through describing the fabulous time he'd shown her.

"Never mind his picture," quipped Rique. "How about his phone number."

"You don't want it," said Regan. "He's the type who chews people up and spits them out."

Rique cocked his head. "Honey, if he's half the man you say he is, he can use me all he likes."

"Rique, let her alone," said Karma. "Can't you tell Regan is upset about this?"

"Upset? Why on earth would you think I'm upset?" Regan wanted to know.

"Because of your nose," said Karma, who was sometimes too observant for her own good. "It's twitching. You only do that when you're upset. When you're trying to deal with really strong emotions you'd just as soon not face."

"I think she's right," agreed Rique, whose opinion had been in no way sought. "This man, he hurt you, didn't he?"

"How could anyone hurt me after one night?" Regan offered stiffly. "He was a good lay and that's that. We had an agreement going in and we held to our ends of the bargain."

Karma, who had a lot more common sense than the forty-year-old Rique, nudged him in the ribs. "We should go. Regan needs time to collect her thoughts."

Rique nodded, ready to depart. "If you need us, Boss..."

Regan managed a smile. "I know."

Two better supporters and friends she couldn't ask for, and she had a feeling she'd be needing to talk to them for real before too long. For now, she'd think about work. Forgetting how she'd barely slept since Venice. How she'd found herself increasingly drawn to self-constraint, to the point of buying a pair of handcuffs at a sex store to wear while masturbating. And not just her old fantasies, either, but new ones, all of them centering on being dominated, controlled and bound, and used for a man's pleasure. Made to come at a whim, for his enjoyment, made to toil in service to his endless erections, all while subject to every sort of erotic pain he desired to inflict.

And then there were the denial games she played. Working herself to the point of orgasming and then holding back. These were the most agonizingly sweet parts of it all. Sometimes she would look at the cover of the book, of the girl, Laura, being spanked. She'd try and remember what was inside, what she'd learned.

The trouble was that such thoughts led her back to him. Back to Giovanni. This was the one thing she wanted to avoid. The men in her fantasies were to be anonymous,

faceless dominators, objects of her lust fulfillment and nothing more. The trouble was, the more she tried to make them *not* Giovanni the more they became him.

With his trim waist and smooth, perfectly muscled abdomen, the pectorals and biceps developed as if to specifications for male perfection. As if DaVinci or Michelangelo had been summoned by God in this man's making to ensure the proper elements.

If only he hadn't turned out to be so shallow. Why was it the beautiful things, the beautiful people always seemed to have the least to offer beneath the surface? People like Karma and Rique were such rare exceptions to this rule. Two bigger hearts you would never find in this world, and yet even at skin level, this inside radiance shone through.

She herself did not match them. No matter what "Giovanni the Liar" had told her. At least she knew her own limits, though. That was the best one could hope for in life. Regan was a workaholic for a reason. It was also abundantly clear now why she did not ever dare to take vacations. Thank goodness she hadn't gone for the full month like they'd wanted her to. She might never have made it back home.

A strange lump formed in her throat as she thought of the beauty she'd left in Italy. The rolling hills and the olives and grapes and the chalk blue sky and the smiling faces of the farmers and the bakers and all the other citizens of that ancient and lovely land.

All of them nice and kind, it seemed, except for one.

Too bad he happened to be the only one she had any feelings for.

Logging onto her computer, she started to sort through the e-mail. Naturally, a ton of it had piled up in her box. The price she paid for not delegating enough to her assistants. Most was routine, involving publicity for a couple of upcoming exhibitions, a number of inquiries from artists and their agents. Some requests from journalists and of course her usual correspondence from her buyers, hot on the trail, as always, for the latest innovations. Millionaires and billionaires, counting on her expertise to steer their art dollars to profits, just as they counted on their stock and commodity brokers.

She was about halfway through when a call came in from Sam Reuben. Sam Senior, that is. He was the founder and still principal owner of the gallery. He was a dear old man, seventy-four with a shock of white hair and some respectable biceps that he still liked to show off. Sam was fond of telling Regan that if he were thirty years younger he'd make a play for her. But it was actually his son, Sam Junior, who he was seriously trying to set up with his trusted manager and gallery coordinator.

Regan loved Sam Senior nearly as much as she loved her own dad, but she had little use for his spoiled, woefully nonfunctioning forty-year-old son. Sam Junior was a wimp. A whiner. In his defense, he'd had everything come too easily, but still, the products of such an upbringing were not pretty to look at.

Sam Junior thought he had a chance with Regan and she dreaded the times he came by the gallery. Occasionally he would attempt to touch her hand with his own far too soft one, or throw winks from his lackluster eyes.

That man was so very much the opposite of Giovanni. And that was the odd thing. It was clear that Giovanni had come from money, too, and yet he was very much a man. His own man. He'd taken up his own career, traveled on his own, dared to see the world through his own unique perspective. This, even more than his devastating good looks was what made him so sexy.

"Regan, sweetheart," he boomed in his characteristic bass. "How was the vacation?"

"Don't ask, Chief. The sooner I delve back into too much work, the better. What have you got for me?"

Sam laughed. "I told you not to mess around with foreign men. You need a nice homegrown boy..."

The thing about Sam was that his hints were always so subtle. That is, if you consider a collision with a *rapido* train locomotive to be subtle. "Gee," she quipped. "I wonder who that might be."

"Three guesses, first two don't count. Seriously, kiddo, I pulled off a minor coup for us, and I want you in on this from the get-go."

"Really? Please tell me it involves impossibly long hours with no hope for recognition."

"As always, my dear. What I've got is a new painter. An unknown in this country. Hell, he's barely known anywhere, but I think he's going to be one of the best of his generation."

"Where from?"

"Italy. I tell you, kiddo, the first time I saw one of his landscapes, I nearly cried. And you know I don't do that often."

"Only when looking at your checkbook."

"Exactly. And you know how serious I take my money."

It was true. Sam was an amazing example of a man so passionate in every area of his life that he treasured equally the acquisition of art, money and women.

"So who is this genius and when do I get to see his work?"

"His name is Giovanni Bellini-Morgan and he's going to be in town this afternoon."

Regan's heart skipped a beat. Surely there were lots of artists in Italy with that name? The phone book must be full of them in a country like that.

"Regan, are you there? What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Sam, I was just making sure my schedule was clearable. When do I meet him?"

"That's my gal. How about I send him 'round about two?"

"Sure, that sounds fine."

As if she had any choice. Her only hope here was that this other Giovanni, whoever he was, didn't look or sound too much like her Giovanni.

Her Giovanni. Listen to her now, making the man her possession. Like she wanted any sort of attachment to him whatsoever.

"I am telling you, kiddo, you will be blown away. A few of his works will be sent over ahead of time for you and the others to look at."

"Okay Sam, thanks."

"Thank you, kiddo. As always, you're my lifesaver."

"It's my pleasure. Besides, who else will look after you," she teased the widower of ten years.

"I have no doubt about that, Regan," he ended on a more serious note. "My question is – who watches after you?"

Who indeed? she thought, nibbling on the end of a pencil. *Who indeed?*

* * * * *

Giovanni found the gallery with no problem. He knew the city, had traveled to it many times before, both on business and for pleasure. For a time, when he'd attempted working with his father, he'd come to oversee some of the old man's larger transactions. Frankly he found the world of currency speculation so deadly dull as to warrant a near rebellion on his part. Fully prepared to be cut off entirely, he had returned to his father's office, and officially resigned his position as a vice president of his company.

Instead of banishing him, the old man had admired his courage in stepping forward. He'd asked Giovanni what he wanted to do. When he answered art he had expected some long lecture on the impracticality of such a career. Instead he'd simply nodded thoughtfully, pursing his full, expressive lips.

"Makes sense," he'd said. "You've got your mother's genes."

The one thing he'd told Giovanni to remember was that he had his father's genes, too. Which meant it was his opportunity in life to combine art with genuine commercial success. To date, he had respectfully declined. Giovanni was moved by beauty, not money. Yes, he needed to make enough to survive and this he did. Beyond that, he merely gave his work away.

How ironic that pursuit of his greatest passion—the woman with the red-gold hair and the curls of fire, with the spirit to match—should lead him to make the most businesslike decision of his life. Could it be that the green-eyed beauty, full of surprise and seemingly endless passion, was going to move him in practical directions?

He liked the gallery immediately. It was smart and clean, lots of glass, wide-open spaces, unpretentious, industrial in its playfulness, but still with a kind of respect, a sense of preciousness in its enclosures. He was struck immediately by how his paintings could fit on these pure, white walls. Their best would show through. Just as choosing the ideal frame made the canvas, so did this, the ideal gallery. It seemed the perfect way to frame his works. Amazing, really. Then again, he had to consider who was responsible for the layout and the upkeep of the place.

It had Regan written all over it. Not a square inch wasted. He could imagine her, with one of her self-devised formulas, calculating the maximum impact she could achieve with each work, allowing the visitor the most efficient journey through the exposed imagination of each of the artists.

Truly, she was a genius. No wonder Sam spoke so highly of her. His only complaint—and he had to bite his tongue here—was that she had no interest in settling down and marrying a nice man like his son.

Was she a lesbian? Sam had wondered aloud.

Sam also spoke very highly of her two assistants, Karma and Enrique, Rique, for short. Rique, according to Sam, was a *faygala*, the Yiddish term for a homosexual. Rique actually liked the word and whenever Sam would visit Rique would call out “bagel for the *faygala*,” and they’d give each other a big hug.

“Can I help you?” said a pretty young blonde, meeting him at the front door. One look at her streaked pink hair, long flowered skirt and bare feet, told him this had to be Karma.

“I’m looking for Miss Regan O’Connell,” he told her. “I’m Giovanni, the painter.”

She gasped audibly. “You’re...him?” Her hand was over her nice, full bosom.

"It depends," he quipped. "On what I'm being accused of." In times past, Giovanni would have been beside himself wanting to seduce this creature so as to have his way with her lovely, naked flesh, but at the moment, he could think of nothing but Regan. It had been like that since she'd left. And the harder he had tried not to think of her, the more he had.

No less than three women had practically thrown themselves at him, including a gorgeous blue-eyed brunette stewardess, but he'd not even given any of them a second glance. Everything was Regan. Thinking what she would say about this or that, how she would react, and above all what she would feel like again in his arms, and how he would make her moan and cry out with need.

"Accused?" Her pretty, clear eyes went wide. "Oh, gosh, no. We...Rique and I have just been floored by your paintings. Three of them arrived just a little while ago."

"I'm flattered," he bowed.

"Rique," she called out. "He's here. Mr. Bellini-Morgan."

"Please, call me Giovanni."

"Oh, no," she shook her head gravely. "I could never."

"But we're nearly the same age," he pointed out.

"No. You're like some kind of...reincarnation from the Renaissance."

"Sam tells me you paint, too? I should like to see something of yours."

She blushed bright, tiny apples on her cheeks. "I screw around with a paintbrush, Mr. Bellini-Morgan. That's all."

"Well...hello..." called the most exuberant voice of a man who could only be Rique. He was dressed all in black. His physique was excellent, like a well-toned ballet dancer. "Be still my beating heart. No wonder you paint like an angel...you are one."

"Enrique." He put out his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you. I am Giovanni Bellini-Morgan."

"Oh, no. The pleasure is all mine," the man assured him.

"I'm sorry, Karma." He extended his hand to the young woman. "I didn't formally introduce myself."

Her hand melted into his. He could feel her pulse, her naked desire. It was clear she wanted him in her bed. Admittedly, she was an inviting package, but she was not the one he wanted.

"You don't have to introduce yourself," she sighed. "I feel as if I've known you all my life."

"Back off, child," warned Rique good-naturedly. "I have first dibs. Age before beauty."

Giovanni grinned. He decided he liked them both. "You both do me honor. More than I deserve. You'll forgive me, though, if I defer to business before pleasure and ask to speak to Miss O'Connell?"

"Oh, I think there could be a little more than business there, too," Rique chuckled.

Karma slapped his arm. "Rique, don't be rude to our guest."

"Well I'm just saying, even Regan wouldn't be so all-fired logical and sensible as to pass up this kind of opportunity."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bellini-Morgan," Karma apologized for him, sounding like the man's sister. "Rique forgets his manners."

"It's quite all right. Really."

If only they knew how right Rique had been about the pleasure between them.

"We'll go get Regan," Karma said, in a clear effort at damage control. "We left her to study your paintings. I'm sure she's ready to sing your praises, too."

"I'll wait here," grinned Rique.

"No." She grabbed his wrist. "You'll come with me."

Giovanni suppressed a grin. He watched the pair of them, off to fetch their boss. His heart thundered in his chest as he waited to see her. Would she look any different, here in her own environment? Would there be any of the intimacy left? She might well

be angry, because of the way he'd left. He realized that was possible. Sometimes women did not understand how he was merely trying to protect them from himself. From his shortcomings.

It had been called a copout attitude by more than one female acquaintance, but it was the only way he knew how to be. So far, at least.

A few moments later the two assistants returned. Alone. Their faces reflected a distinct change. Karma's lower lip disappeared between tiny, pearl-white teeth as she prepared to speak.

"To be perfectly honest, Mr. Bellini-Morgan, Regan has had, well, kind of a strange reaction to your paintings."

He fought to keep his tone neutral. "And what sort of reaction would that be?"

Karma looked like a deer in front of headlights.

"Well, it's a bit awkward," said Rique at last. "But she seems to..."

"She hates them," blurted Karma. "And I've no idea why."

Giovanni raised an eyebrow. "Indeed."

She'd figured it out. Clever woman that she was. She'd put the clues together. The name, the profession, and the home country. Not to mention the subject matter of the three paintings, each chosen for maximum effect. She'd have to be a fool not to get the message.

And if there was one thing you could say about Regan, she was no fool.

"I'm so sorry," said Karma. "I'm sure it's just...on account of it being her first day back and all. She was on vacation, you see."

"It's quite all right," he assured them. "I won't impose myself any longer. If you would just leave Miss O'Connell a message for me?"

"Of course," said Karma.

"Tell her I'm at the Carleton Arms. She can find me in the lounge this evening."

"And what about me?" Rique teased. "Can I find you there?"

"Never you mind," snapped Karma. "You're going to be at my place, tonight. Watching videos."

"Oh, joy." He rolled his eyes.

"Behave yourself," she warned. "Or I won't let you borrow any of my funky nail polish."

"Undone by own vanity," he sighed. "As always."

"It's been a real joy to meet you both." Giovanni shook their hands.

"For us, too," they said almost in unison.

He waited until he was out in the street to unleash his glee. So Regan hated the paintings, did she? That could only mean one thing. She had feelings, all right. Far more powerful than she was prepared to deal with at present. And the fact that he was so excited about this meant that he had them too.

"You can run all you like," he murmured under his breath, enjoying a leisurely walk down the sidewalk to his nearby hotel. "But you can't hide, *Carina*. You are the woman I will marry, like it or not."

* * * * *

"Not another word about it," Regan warned, preempting yet another attempt by the Dynamic Duo to solve the mystery of the paintings. "Or I'll have you both strung up as *piñatas* for the *Colores De Mexico* exhibit next month."

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Rique, ever the bolder of the pair. "Anyway, I hate them, too."

The man's hands were on his hips. His head was shaking comically. How was Regan supposed to stay mad?

"If you could just give us a little clue, though?" Karma had her thumb and forefinger out, the bubblegum tips of her nails ever so close together. "As to what you don't like about the paintings?"

"Fine," she sighed. "If I tell you, will you two leave me alone? Really leave me alone, like for the rest of the day?"

"Cross my heart and hope to turn straight," vowed Rique.

Regan looked at the three paintings lined up on the sofa. How could she begin to tell them what was wrong with such obvious masterpieces? How could she say that her objections were entirely personal because she knew they were the work of a scoundrel who'd not only used her but had come back, so it seemed, for seconds?

As if this man would ever have privileges over her body again in this lifetime.

She began with *Starlight Over Venice*. "Those don't look like stars," she said lamely. "And I can tell you firsthand, *gondoliers* don't wear blue-striped shirts."

"But I think that's making a statement, don't you?" Karma offered sensibly. "Anyway, colors look different in the dark."

"That one's even worse." She pointed out the middle one, *Vineyard in Tuscany*. "I can't even tell if those are grapes or olives?"

"Maybe that's the point..." Karma suggested. "I see a lot of neo-surrealism here, combined with—"

"Forget that one," interjected Rique. "Even if that were total crap, which it isn't, what complaint can you possibly have about this last one?"

Regan frowned. That was the worst of all. *Virgin of San Borromeo*. The bastard's hometown. No doubt she wasn't a virgin after Giovanni got through with her. The nerve of painting a beautiful young woman like that, just as a pretense to get her into bed.

"That one is obscene," declared Regan. "I wouldn't even put it up on the wall of a whorehouse."

Karma looked at Rique, justifiably dumbfounded by her remark. "I'm not sure I see what you mean," she said. "She's clearly over eighteen, and she's got her clothes on and it's only her upper body..."

Regan threw up her hands. "You see, that's why I didn't want to talk to you about this. You twist everything around. It's as plain as the nose on my face."

They backed up, lockstep.

"All righty, then," said Rique.

"I'm not going crazy," Regan insisted, rising from her seat. "I just have...jet lag."

The perfect excuse, she decided, to leave early. Gathering her purse, she excused herself. "I'll be back in the morning, and I fully expect you two to have gotten a grip on things by then."

"Sure thing, Regan," said Karma, having the grace not to point out just what a load of projected bullshit that was. "Oh, by the way? There is one more thing."

Regan glared, halfway burned through her last nerve. "Yes, Karma?"

Karma cleared her throat. "He left you a message."

She had her back up at once. "He who?" she demanded.

"The painter. Mr. Bellini-Morgan."

"Oh." Regan did her best to project indifference. "And what on earth did he have to say?"

"He wanted you to know that he was staying at the Carleton Arms. He said he'd be in the lounge this evening."

"Is that right?" she railed. "As if I care. The nerve of the man!"

Regan whirled on her heel and stormed out. She would go and see him, all right, but not for any pleasant reunion. Regan had one objective in mind. And that involved all-out war—taking the fight to the enemy. So Giovanni thought he could waltz back into her life, did he? Well, he had another think coming. Not only was she going to tell

him where to get off with his artwork, she was going to make sure he took the nearest *rapido* anything out of the country and out of her mind...forever.

Chapter Six

Giovanni smiled to himself when she arrived. He had been waiting for Regan in this dingy cocktail lounge since five. He knew she would show up eventually, as surely as he knew the sun would rise tomorrow, here and in beautiful Venice. She would come fighting mad, of course, but come she would. With her perfect nostrils flaring, her eyes dazzling green fire and her hair like a corona, enveloping her face. She was such an incredible creature, beyond anything Giovanni could ever hope to paint or even to imagine. If he were to never see her again – if he were to never see a bloody thing in this world from here on in – he would count himself a fulfilled man.

He had staked out a table for them in the corner. The place was dimly lit, the furniture a heavy dark wood. Orange-yellow overhead lights hung from small chandeliers. The bar was a long slab of oak, a coffin more than anything, or a half-sunken ship. This was a bar for drowning sorrows, for picking up new lovers, and for otherwise forgetting one's identity. The bartender, a balding man with rolled-up white sleeves, played his part well, cleaning and re-cleaning the glasses, and minimizing eye contact with the handful of patrons slumped over the highly polished surface nursing their pale-colored drinks.

Regan didn't fit. She was too radiant. Too vibrant. Too full of purpose. Her hips shimmied with her indignation as she walked toward him. Such a body – slender waist and full bosom, those pouting lips capable of a million subtle expressions, more than one of them enough to rival the *Mona Lisa* for complexity.

"Hello," he said, as soon as she assumed her battle stance, looming across the table. "*Carina.*"

Her lips pursed. He could see the emotions dancing in her eyes. What fun he would have with her this night, re-conquering, re-staking his claim upon her body. And her soul.

"Don't call me that," she said. "You've no right. In fact, you shouldn't be here at all."

"Really? But I have a visa, and as far as I know your country is as free as mine," he pointed out.

"The country, yes," she acknowledged. "But not me. I'm closed. Permanently."

He smiled crookedly. "Even if I have a passport."

She folded her arms. "I'm not playing games with you, Giovanni. You're a miserable bastard as far as I'm concerned. You fucked with me on my vacation, and that's my stupidity. If you think you come here and fuck with my job, though, you have another think coming."

"I fail to see what I am doing to hurt your job. Sam loves my paintings. He thinks the show will be a great success."

Her eyes narrowed. "What exactly did you tell him...about us?"

"Nothing at all, *Carina*. That is our secret."

"It's not a secret," she dismissed. "It's not anything...other than ancient history."

He extended a hand. "Why don't you sit down? We can talk about this."

Her lips curled down—a moment's hesitation, deadly in the long run. "I haven't anything more to say to you."

"But I have things to say to you, *Carina*. I cannot sleep. I cannot eat. Without you...my heart mourns."

He could see the strength draining from her limbs. Were he attempting merely to seduce her he would note imminent victory. This wasn't about seduction, though. This was something far deeper and potentially life-changing. For it was not merely her conquest at stake, but his own.

"Giovanni, you are talking foolishness. Why won't you just move on?"

"There is no moving on. My life stopped. The moment I laid eyes on you."

"Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you walked out on me."

"It was our agreement, *Carina*. To stay would have been...a violation."

She shook her head. "No, I'm not buying that. You're too smart, too sensitive a man. You were afraid. You were afraid of what would happen if you did stay."

"Maybe I was," he challenged. "But if you leave now, wouldn't you be doing the same thing?"

She put her hands to the sides of her head in an adorable display of exasperation. "Why do you always do that? Everything I say, you find some way to twist it. You're as bad as Karma and Rique."

"They are both delightful, by the way. And it's clear how much they care about you. You'll do well to keep them close to you."

"Yes, well, you are the expert on my life now, aren't you? After all it's been what—sixteen hours total we've spent together."

"It will be another twelve by dawn, *Carina*."

"No," she vowed. "It will not."

"This time I will love you with abandon," he said. "Nothing will be held back."

"You need to stop dreaming," she accused. "I'm not one of your paintings. I'm a real woman with a real voice. And right now that voice is rejecting you."

"Sit, *Carina*."

"I'm not a dog," she defied.

"You're a woman," he concurred. "My woman."

"Go to hell."

"Sit," he repeated, his voice taking on an edge of passion, an edge of pure male strength she could not help but respond to.

"You are wasting your time," she told him, even as she planted herself across from him, exactly as instructed.

Giovanni ordered her a glass of white wine, which the bartender promptly brought. "Tell me, *Carina*, your worst fear."

"That you will trick me into bed again."

He laughed. "But there's no trick to it. I am claiming you. Forever."

"You don't even know me, Giovanni. Anyway, you're way too young."

"Too young for what? To know how to love? Have you ever read *Romeo and Juliet*?"

"You see? That's your problem. You want things to be like they are in a play. This is the real world. People get hurt. People get beat up."

"You bought a book, did you not?" he countered. "One that sparked your fantasies? We lived it out. Wasn't that real?"

"For one night." She held up a lone finger. "That hardly makes a relationship."

"The longest relationship begins with a single night."

"So does the bitterest divorce."

"I will never allow that to happen."

"Listen to yourself, Giovanni," she accused. "You're making promises you can't keep. You've no idea what a marriage would bring."

"It's a matter of trust. You surrender your heart, and I protect it."

"That's a fairy tale, Giovanni. Not reality."

"Give me your hand," he said.

She held it out, palm up.

He placed his own hand beneath hers. "Have you ever had your palm read?"

"No, it's a lot of nonsense as far as I'm concerned."

"Probably. But don't you think there is a kernel of truth in every superstition?" He placed the tip of his index finger in the center of her palm. "Hold still," he ordered when she tried to pull it back.

Regan shuddered as he traced a course along her lifeline.

"You will have a very long life," he predicted. "As my wife."

Her breathing had quickened. She was trying to fight the sensations he was building. "Giovanni, that's enough."

"It's only the beginning." He smiled. "You know how I yearn to touch you? And how your body begs for me? I can be hard, *Carina*, or soft. I can put you over my knee and reduce you to much-needed tears and then kiss them away with my lips."

"I don't need...tears."

"Everyone has guilt. Everyone secretly craves punishment."

"What about you, then?"

He winked. "Perhaps you can try your hand at punishing me one day."

Regan was squirming in her chair. He knew that what he was doing to her palm—caressing, teasing—had a direct link to her pussy.

"Are you wet for me, *Carina*?"

She closed her eyes against the question, the admission.

"I asked a question," he reminded gently. "You may either answer me here or I will take you around back in the alley and discern for myself."

"I'm wet," whispered Regan.

"I couldn't quite hear you."

"My pussy is wet for you," she repeated with more vigor.

Giovanni continued to work her palm. "What does your pussy need?"

Her lips were moist, half-open. Her eyes were already glazing over. "I need...you."

"You may resume calling me Sir."

"I need you, Sir. In my pussy."

"Open your legs, *Carina*. They are not to be closed in my presence."

She shifted with a deep, sexual sigh. For all intents and purposes he was penetrating her even as they spoke.

"You may unbutton the top two buttons of your blouse, *Carina*."

She did so, leaving him a splendid view of her cleavage.

"Are your nipples hard for me?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you know what I'm going to do to them tonight, *Carina*?"

"Whip them, Sir...and clamp them." The words came half-spoken, half-moaned.

He let her go, mission accomplished. "Put your hands on the table. Open your thighs wider."

Regan obeyed, completely his.

"You're going to earn my cock tonight," he said. "You'll start with a nice, large dildo. You can show me, on that, how worthy you are."

Her eyes were moist with need, moist with the devotion of the submissive woman. "Thank you, Sir."

"Is your little pussy hungry, *Carina*?"

"Very, Sir."

"And your mouth?"

"Yes," she promised.

"I hope so. I have the whip," he reminded.

"I won't disappoint you."

He looked her in the eye. "I won't be so easy on you this time."

"I know, Sir."

"Sit forward," he ordered. "Pucker your lips."

He gave her a sip of the wine. She drank it down, her features so very soft and delicious. "I love you, *Carina*."

She could not reply. In truth he did not wish her to. She would come to the understanding in her own time.

"I have chains for you," he told her. "You will wear them tonight."

"Yes, Sir," she breathed.

When? Her eyes begged, how much longer would she have to wait?

Visions flashed through his mind, of things wicked and servile that he would make her do before dawn. The thing of it was, they needed to get back to the room first.

"One more sip." He held the glass to her lips. "And then we're leaving."

She took the wine down dutifully. The sight of her swallowing made his cock rage. "Let's go," he said, setting down the half-filled glass.

Regan let herself be led by the elbow from the lounge, then down the corridor. Such a different woman than the one who'd entered a short while ago, and yet the same—to whoever had the ability to see below her surface persona.

They were the only passengers on the elevator. Three floors up, the silent sterility of the clean, mirrored walls overwhelming them both, they found themselves locked in a full-frontal embrace. His cock pressed hard against the material of her skirt. It was going to be a battle to get her to the room first, let alone taking the time to tease her with an artificial cock like he intended.

On tiptoes, Regan melted, her face and lips totally engaged. She moaned in approval as he cupped her ass cheeks and gave her a trial swat.

His hand seemed to bring out a new mood in her. "Sir," she mouthed, her lips tickling his. "I want to be worthy. May I please be worthy?"

Giovanni hadn't the will to hold her up. She was slithering down against him, all the way to her knees. "I beg you, Sir. Please honor me with your cock?"

He leaned forward, having the presence of mind to hit the manual stop button.

"This wasn't in the plan," he informed her as her nimble fingers worked on his zipper. "I'd intended to make you grovel, licking the dildo for an hour or so."

"You're a very mean man," she informed him, pulling out his naked, very stiff erection.

He looked down at his cock, thick and purple, pointed upward in clear salute to the naughty, enthusiastic Miss O'Connell. "Tell me you hate it."

"I hate it," she pronounced, dabbing the tip of his shaft with the curled end of her tongue, a quick darting motion to capture the drop of pre-come.

He stroked her silky mane, a prelude to grasping it. "Liars get punished, *Carina*."

She licked around the end, light motions promising oh-so much more. "I'm counting on it."

"What is that saying?" he reminded her. "Be careful what you hope for?"

"Wish for," she corrected, delivering an electrifying run down the underside, pressing right along the pulsing bluish vein.

He took hold of her head, winding her hair in his fingers. "Slave girls should be fucked," he teased. "Not heard."

Regan's jaw slackened as her eyes slid closed in a gesture of pure loving submission. Immediately, he went to the halfway point, enjoying the silky pocket of her mouth, just as perfect a fit as he remembered.

"*Carina*," he sighed. "I would not wish this from any other ever again. Only you have made it...like heaven."

She responded with a rather flirtatious wriggling of her tongue, combined with a cheeky slurp. Laughing at the sheer joy of his *Carina*, he pressed deeper, to the back of her throat. She took him with ease, using her hands to wrap around the base of him to enclose the rest. Her mouth bobbed happily on its own, the guidance of his hands hardly needed.

Letting his grip slide down to her shoulders, he groaned in sheer ecstasy. "You spoil me," he said.

She sucked all the more vigorously, indicating that spoiling him was exactly what she had in mind.

"So tempting," he sighed. "To come like this."

Regan seemed not to mind this possibility one bit. Indeed, with her hands now placed on his buttocks to draw him deeper, she looked ready to receive the whole of his issue.

The trouble was he had designs on other parts of her anatomy, too. In this case, her glorious sex, bent over from behind.

"Stand, *Carina*," he nudged. "I have another idea."

He had to help her to her feet. She was weak and flushed, and seemed on the verge of tears for losing her blowjob opportunity.

"Turn," he said, moving her to the railing of the elevator.

It was an aluminum bar running the entirety of the four walls. She gripped it solidly, her knuckles turning white.

Using his hands and simple voice commands, he put her in the proper position, legs apart, skirt hoisted up her back. Lowering her fragrant panties to her ankles, he kissed his way back up, stopping at the backs of her knees, her thighs, and finally the entrance to her sex. A tiny rivulet of her sweet emission poured forth in response. Wasting no further time, he took his place behind her.

"Tell me what you want, *Carina*."

"Your cock, Sir," she resumed a more humble tone. "Pretty please, I need to be taken by you."

He'd never heard more inviting words. "Prepare yourself, my *Carina*."

She cried out as he thrust himself to the hilt.

"Oh, god," she exclaimed. "Fucking fuck me...Sir."

He slid back out, angling for another go. This time he aimed for her clit. Giovanni was rewarded with a satisfied, feminine squeal. There was no holding him back now. Grunting again and again he pummeled at her slit, making his cock vanish only to reappear a second later, glistening, ready for more. In and out, in and out, 'til her moaning and thrashing and pushing back against him drove him mad with the need to explode inside her. Deeper than he'd ever been in any woman, so deep that there would never again be the possibility of another man for her, neither in her pussy nor anywhere else in her life.

"*Carina*," he growled, the slamming and bucking having built to the point of no return.

"Yes," she screamed in reply, her own canal vibrating in echo, clenching and unclenching in obvious anticipation of her own orgasm. "Do it...use me."

And use he did, both for his pleasure and her own. One final push and then the unleashing, the opening of the floodgates, the pouring forth through that tight narrow opening in his cock of so much stored-up passion. Every drop since last they'd been together. It was as if his seed really did belong here, planted inside her.

They held to one another through the aftershocks, until every drop of semen was absorbed, until all the convulsions had died away to a peaceful glow.

Only then, when all the passion had cleared, did he remember they were in an elevator. Putting away his cock, he watched as his wanton lover reached between her legs. Scooping the fluid, hers and his, she put it in her mouth, sucking her fingers. Warm, sensuous eyes, full of the devil gave her away – just how far she'd come already.

"You're going to end up more deviant than me if you're not careful," he warned, helping her to pull up her panties and smooth down her skirt

"I don't think that's possible in this lifetime," she deadpanned, starting the elevator back up.

Personally, he wasn't so sure. Either way, he stood to be the winner, though, of one hell of an interesting night. And after that...a lifetime more.

"When we get to the room," he said as soon as the elevator doors slid open, "you will take off all your clothes and kneel for me in the center of the floor."

That look was back on her face, the impish, challenging smile, and the dancing eyes. "You'll have to catch me first."

With that she took off down the corridor. Full-speed. He should have known she wouldn't go down quietly. Then again, he'd have been sorely disappointed if she had.

Feeling light as a feather, he took off after her, his heart anticipating her capture...and his cock as well.

* * * * *

Regan was dead-ended. There was nothing at the end of this hall but a double-door suite. Behind her, Giovanni was coming up fast. She turned, ready to do battle.

"Come near me," she dared, her fist poised to pound on the door of the Royal Suite, "and I will knock on this door and scream rape."

He stopped several feet in front of her, hands on his trim hips. He looked so good in his black trousers, black silk shirt and leather jacket. She had wanted to eat him up from the moment she'd seen him. Although she had also wanted to kill him, which made it a little complicated.

"Knock all you like, no one will answer," he said.

"How do you know?" she retorted, feeling particularly playful and feisty after the good fuck he'd given her in the elevator. "It's the Royal Suite. Maybe there is a handsome prince in there who will rescue me."

"Doubtful," he deadpanned. "The suite is mine."

"Oh." She looked at the key dangling in his hand. She had only one chance now.

Her lunge was clumsy. He saw her coming a mile away. Lifting the key over her head he grabbed her around the waist.

"Let go!" she squealed.

"You'll get a spanking for this," he said, dragging her good-naturedly to the door. Holding her with one arm, he used the other to unlock the suite.

"Over my dead body."

Pushing her through the door he gave her a taste to come, delivering a smack to her posterior.

"That really hurt," she exaggerated.

"It will hurt a lot more if I don't see you naked in about thirty seconds," he teased.

Regan felt the familiar rush. He was doing it again. Taking charge, in that naughty, nasty, totally politically incorrect way of his.

"Okay, already." She read the steel in his expression. "I'm stripping already."

He watched her take off her blouse and skirt, bra and panties. "Over the edge of the chair," he pointed as she looked for somewhere to place the items.

Fully nude now, Regan set about finding the center of the floor. Her knees tingled on the plush carpet. Every part of her felt so alive. She could feel air from the vents brush lightly over her skin. Her nipples were so tight.

"Thighs wide apart," he commanded. "Hands behind your head."

She did so. The position forced her to arch her back, causing her breasts to protrude. He stood there, just looking, and then walked away without comment. She could hear him behind her at the bar, mixing a drink. She pictured the ice cubes, cold and square...what would they feel like on her body? And the liquor, smooth and hot, burning her throat, drizzling down her neck as he forced her to drink it.

"You have such a great little ass, *Carina*. It's no wonder I want to fuck you every time I see you."

"Thank you, Sir." She felt a hot wave of weakness. He was reducing her to an object, deliberately humiliating her for mutual arousal.

"And those fine breasts of yours. You could be a stripper, do you know that?"

"If you say so, Sir."

He seized her hair, bending back her neck. "Are you mocking me?"

"No, Sir, I swear it."

"Perhaps I should get some bellhops up here, *Carina*. To show you just what that body of yours is good for. Would you like that?"

Her breathing neared panting level. He was fucking her—with his taunts, his fantasies.

"I want to serve you, Sir. Please...save me for yourself?"

"Why should I?" he sneered.

The drama was wrapping her like a snake, coiling about her libido. "Because I'll be good, Sir," she replied, using her best little whore's voice. "I'll do everything you want..."

"I want a horny little slave, Regan. Is that what you are?"

He had used her name. It sounded almost foreign on his lips. For a moment she grew frightened. Was he rejecting her?

"I'll be your slave," she vowed. "Your horny little slave girl."

"Put your hand in your pussy. Masturbate."

She went to work. "Yes, Sir."

"Don't stop."

He left her like that, letting her run her fingers up and down, exposing her deepest desires, her most private techniques.

A few moments later he returned with the dildo. Dropping it at her feet he said, "Use this."

Regan picked it up. It was ten inches long, thick and made of hard plastic. Hands trembling, she positioned it at her slit.

"Not so fast," he said. "I want you to worship it first."

Regan melted at his feet. He was demanding nothing less than her total, naked subjugation.

"Yes, Sir."

Squatting back on her heels, she wrapped both hands around it. Lifting it like a ritual object, she raised it high. At the same time she lowered her head, allowing her hair to fall forward onto the carpet. Her head swam at the implications.

"I submit myself," she declared solemnly.

Regan kissed the cock, licking along the sides of it, ministering to every inch of it. Next, once she'd covered it with a thin, glistening coat of her saliva, she pressed it between her breasts. Her nipples ached for attention and so she pushed the hard plastic tip against each one, flattening it. From there it was a simple matter to rub it across her cheeks, allowing the object to be properly venerated. More kisses, licks, then dutiful sucks.

She commenced to deep throat the dildo with abandon and without complaint. At this moment the cock owned her body, in his stead. A stand-in for his delectable shaft. Moans escaped her throat as she passed the cock across her stomach, into her belly button, over the concave surface of her flesh. And then down, down to her honeyed nether regions.

"Sir, may I put it inside me?" She felt the need to ask permission.

"You'll do more than that, slave."

She caught his meaning. "Yes, Sir." She shoved it deep, giving it immediate possession of the entirety of her cavity.

Regan groaned as her invaded pussy sought to accommodate the dildo. Her pitiful cries only urged him on.

"Fuck yourself, slave. Hard."

She saw stars. "C-coming," she spit through clenched teeth, the dildo zipping in and out so fast it was like having someone else controlling it.

"No orgasm," he warned. But it was too late.

Regan was already spilling all over the floor at his feet, wildly cramming the dildo in and out of her gaping hole. He waited for the act to be complete, his presence an ominous shadow. She felt ashamed of herself for doing this, but at the same time, that was making it all the hotter.

At last she collapsed, wilted into a ball on the rug, sweating and broken.

Giovanni gave her no respite. "Back up on your knees," he commanded, offering proper incentive with a quick snap of the crop on her exposed ass.

Regan yelped in protest, and then remembered it was pointless because, as far as Giovanni was concerned, he had every right to treat her like an animal.

Just to be on the safe side, she put her hands back behind her head.

Giovanni barely contained a smirk as he flicked each nipple with the tip of the whip. "In case you hadn't noticed," he said. "That was an example of slave training. Behavior taught with the whip."

Regan clenched her thighs. Damn it, she was coming again, just from the combination of his statement and the sensations on her nipples.

"I have never seen a woman remotely like you," he said in awe. "Count yourself lucky that I am taking you as my own, or you might have found yourself sadly exploited."

"Compared to this?" she managed to exhale. "What more could there be?"

"This? This is nothing," he laughed. "Haven't you heard of white slavery? Beautiful women forced against their wills into slavery? It happens every day."

Her head swam at the possibilities. "Would I be used as a whore?"

"If you were lucky. If you were unlucky, you'd be turned into a pet, a horse in some rich man's stable, or an honest-to-goodness doggie, with a leash and tape on your hands and legs to keep you from rising to your feet."

Regan tried to imagine crawling around with taped limbs barking for her supper. "You're full of shit. Who would even be turned on by that?"

"There's a perversion for everyone under the sun...and that's 'You're full of shit, Sir,' to you."

Regan stifled a smile. He always managed to find levity, no matter how serious things were supposed to be. "Duly noted."

"Crawl to the bed, *Carina*. There are chains on it. I want you to fetch them. In your teeth, if you would be so kind."

"I guess that answers my question about who'd be turned on watching a woman act like a dog...Sir."

"Go." He aimed the whip in the direction of the bed, a slight scowl on his handsome face.

Grinning over her small victory, Regan went to all fours on the carpet. "If I pick up any static electricity," she quipped, "don't blame me."

That remark earned her a dose of the crop. She winced, deciding it was worth it. Scooting forward, she headed for her objective. Yet another bed in yet another hotel room.

The chains were hanging over the edge. Pretty and thin, gleaming silver, a cross between fashion jewelry and prison confinement gear. There were several of them, a complicated arrangement featuring cuffs at either end of strands of varied lengths. They tasted cold and foreign between her lips. She bit down on them and resumed her shuffle—hand over hand—back to her Master for the night.

"I'll bet you're wondering how we'll use those," he speculated. "Aren't you, my pet?"

Regan dropped the chains and nipped at his leg, deciding to play bad doggie. "Bow-wow." She beamed impishly at him.

Giovanni scooped her up, a look on his face that she could only describe as pure and utter enjoyment of her being.

"I'll fix you, you little minx."

She ended up over his knees as he sat himself at the edge of the bed. Happily, she felt her crotch and her breasts against him. Her ass tingled in anticipation. As usual, he stretched out her sentence with lots of teasing and way too much lecturing.

"I warned you of the consequences of misbehavior, didn't I? But you knew that. You disobey because it feels good, and you secretly crave the results."

"There's no secret about it, Art Boy." She wiggled herself pointedly. "I like spankings. Your spankings."

He rubbed her bottom. "Well, you should hold out just a little. For argument's sake."

"And give you the satisfaction? Never."

He rained blows, this time requiring her to count along. A slow cadence, one to twenty, each one just a little sharper than the last. By ten she was ready for it to be done.

"How about I take back all the obnoxious things I said?" She sought to bargain for a reprieve.

"Take back all you want," he pressed on with a mild vengeance. "I'm doing this for my pleasure now."

Okay, so he'd turned the tables on her. Good for him. That's what she liked about him. One of the things anyway. Sure, she was constantly confounded and aggravated by him, but he just kept tugging at her heartstrings. Again and again. And the madder he got her, the harder it was to let go.

Not that she intended to marry him...but maybe a few dates might be okay, just to see where things went.

"That's enough of that," he announced after the twentieth blow. "I think you're starting to enjoy that too much."

"The hell I am." She winced.

Giovanni chuckled, that rich voice of his reflecting so clearly the talented passion of his mother. "Let's see about getting you fitted in steel."

He rather unceremoniously tossed her on her belly onto the bed. She lifted her head just in time to see him stripping himself. Her mouth watered by sheer reflex.

"And you tell me I'm beautiful," she exclaimed as he bared his sculpted torso.

"You are." He pulled down his trousers and underwear, revealing a fresh hard-on. "I'm just a man, nothing special."

"Maybe not to you," she countered. "But to me, or any other woman on the planet, it's a whole different story."

"Does that bother you?" he wondered. "When other women are looking at me?"

"I couldn't care less," she insisted. "This is strictly a one-night stand...all right, so technically it's a two-night stand," she corrected herself.

"Except you aren't doing much standing."

"Not by my own choice."

"So leave. There's the door."

"You would actually let me?"

He went to retrieve the chains. "I told you I wouldn't force anything. Ever. On your back," he prompted.

She complied, mostly from curiosity. "You plan on wrapping me like a mummy?"

"Not quite. Knees up." He pushed her feet forward. "Palms at your side."

He secured two of the cuffs around her ankle. She was growing to like his touch on her body. It was more than just the sex. There was a knowing in it, a caring.

Though the sex part was pretty good, too.

"Chains excite many women, *Carina*. In ways ropes cannot. There are connotations. Of ancient captivity and of unbreakable power. Plus the feeling of the links. Cool and smooth."

He dangled one of the chains over her breast.

"Oh, Giovanni," she squirmed, "I love...this."

She'd almost said *I love you*. How inappropriate and risky would that have been? It was bad enough that he'd blurted the words to her—ill-advised and clearly not meant. She chalked it up to a function of his youth. She was doing that a lot lately, which was odd considering how often he managed to trump her with his own skill and technique.

"Personally, I love to see a woman struggling, ladylike in loose chains, nothing too heavy." Giovanni attached the other end of each cuff to the corresponding ankle. He fed another around her waist, linking it with the first two.

"Go on," he urged. "Try and get free."

She pulled obediently. It was impossible to straighten her legs or lift her arms. She could not rise off the bed either.

"I can't," she told him.

"Indeed." His brow arched. She loved that expression and the wild lust it entailed.

"Tell me, Giovanni," she felt the sudden urge to ask. "Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"No. I was an only child. Very much planned. And you?"

"Two brothers, an older and a younger sister. Basically I was a caught-in-the-middle rag doll."

"You make a good doll. Though I'm not sharing you...all games aside."

She hid her pleasure at hearing him say that. "I don't know," she warned, "I'm pretty expensive."

Giovanni produced a bar, which he connected to the cuffs on her ankles. She was forced to spread her legs in the process—very wide apart. "I'm pretty rich," he reminded.

"I had quite forgotten."

"I know," he said in all seriousness. "That is one of the things that makes you so special."

"I don't want to be special right now," she said. "I want to get laid."

"You really are my horny little slave girl, aren't you?" he noted lovingly.

"That's me," she gave her best attempt at fluttered eyelashes. "Regan the HLSG, at your service."

He dove between her legs for a kiss. "That's the spirit."

She giggled appreciatively as he tickled the hair on her pussy with his nose.

"*Carina*, I have a confession to make." He popped his head up, his eyebrows dipped gravely.

"Don't tell me, you're a mass murderer? A Jehovah's Witness? A used car salesman in hunk's clothing?"

"No, though those are interesting possibilities. Actually, this concerns our meeting on the train."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid it wasn't exactly an accident that I found your passport."

"What do you mean?"

For the first time she saw hints of redness on the cheeks of the ever calm and cool Giovanni Bellini-Morgan. "I arranged to bring you your passport, *Carina*. I pocketed it, unbeknownst to you, when you dropped your bag."

"You naughty boy!" she exclaimed, feeling anything but upset. "At last I have some dirt on you. You owe me big-time now."

Giovanni sought to employ a secret weapon, one heretofore used only minimally. He tickled her. This, more than the spanking or the sexual teasing even, had her begging for mercy in seconds. "All right," she laughed through her tears, "I give."

He settled himself easily between her thighs. "I am going to fuck you. Any objections?"

"As if there were a damned thing I could do to stop you!"

"You have the safe word," he reminded.

She'd nearly forgotten it. How droll it seemed now. How remote. In a way it only compounded her conquest now that he was doing these things to her and she was letting him. By not using the safe word, she merely reinforced the fact that she wanted this. To be lying under the man, naked, chained, penetrated.

He poised at her entryway. "What do you want, *Carina*?"

"You," she said without hesitation. "Inside me."

"I take you on my terms," he warned. "No compromise."

She tried to look away from the intensity of his gaze. "Please, Giovanni, can't it just be about the sex, just this once?"

He pushed his cock deep, even as he grasped her nipple. "Look at me, *Carina*."

She felt herself enslaved in his eyes.

"You are mine," he said. "You've always been mine. Since before I was born. It is fate."

"You don't know that," she insisted.

"Yes," he defied, "I do."

In and out he moved, branding her, deep and hot. It wasn't like the other fucks and as good as it felt, it scared her, too. How could he do that, go from playful and funny to deadly serious in the space of a few heartbeats?

"No man will enter you, *Carina*, ever again. None but me."

Emotions swirled. Desire. Fear. Panic. "I can't make that commitment."

"Too late. Your body already has. You will never be at peace without me. No man, no cock will ever please you again."

"But you make it too hard." She was struggling, testing her limits.

"It is how you want it and crave it. You bought the book, not me."

"But that isn't really me. I'm not Laura. I'm not the *Prisoner of Sex*."

"No, you are much more," he agreed. "And I will cherish you in a million ways, worship you even, believe it or not, as the goddess you are. But here, in bed, you are always my prisoner. My slave, *Carina*."

"No," she bucked, "I made a mistake. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Hush," he soothed, his lips at her neck. "It is time to come for me, like the hot little beauty you are. Don't you see? I give you peace. Out there in the world you must try so hard to be so many things to so many people, but with me, in here, it is all so very simple...just as you always dreamed it would be."

"I can't be a sex object."

"Why not?" He laughed. "When it's sex you are having?"

Her chains jingled on the bed. She tugged at the silver strands. "I'm so helpless. I hate that."

"And you love it, too."

She bit her lips against the admission. If she truly confessed her need for this... Could make herself vulnerable, open herself to the highs and lows, let him in to those places deep inside where she allowed no one? Love—if that's what this was—took a person only so far. Her father had taught her the limits. Hadn't her mother, lovely person that she was, died at a young age, largely from sacrificing herself too much for her family?

"Admit it, *Carina*."

Her accursed body leapt to his caress, a soft lick across her nipples. She'd have preferred the whip. "I admit it..."

Trained to obey, she thought, like a horny little slave girl.

Abruptly, he rose. "Perhaps I'll stop," he announced. "I may have worn you out."

Bastard. He wanted her pride, too. Handed over with a blue ribbon. "Giovanni, don't fuck around with me."

"I'm not," he said in all innocence. Indeed, he was doing anything but.

Her now empty hole throbbed with need. Her body screamed for her to get him back, to do or say anything. "Look, I just want to...continue. Can we?"

"Continue what?"

"Making love."

"But you seemed not to be enjoying it."

"I was. Really, I was."

"I don't want to be an imposition."

She lifted her hips, advertising her glistening thighs, slick with her own emissions. "Does this look like an imposition?"

"You tell me."

"It's not. I want...I need your cock."

He remained stoic.

"Please, Sir, fuck me with your cock."

Still not enough.

"Use me," she breathed, falling under his spell all over again, his aloof male power contrasted with her feminine desperation. "Use my body, Sir."

"You don't know me," he said, the statement throwing her for a complete loop.

It was true, in so many ways she didn't, but she wanted to, more than anything.

"Teach me, Sir, please?"

"I can't if you won't trust, *Carina*. You won't even tell me your desires. What am I to do?"

"There's the book—that says it all!"

"It says nothing. You yourself told me this. Books are characters. Who is Regan, and what does she dream of?"

“Nothing,” she said teary-eyed. “And everything. I cry late at night, when I’m alone. After fighting tooth and nail all day. No one sees that, though, do they? What are my dreams? If you must know, I think about a strong man, not afraid to totally take hold of me, to love all of me.”

“Describe him. Tell me what he does to you.”

“Looks don’t matter, it’s how he makes me feel. He can chain me, command me, he can spoil me, and he can make it all right to be a woman by putting up with it all. The bitch in me, the princess, the queen, the slut.”

“And you cry that you can’t have it. But have you looked? To begin with, inside yourself?”

Regan had had enough of this pop psychology. She was tired of being dime-store analyzed by a puppy. “Fuck you, Giovanni. You don’t know the first thing about how hard life can be.”

He fell on top of her, sinking to the hilt. “Now we come to the crux. Your prejudices. I’m too young, too Italian, too rich, spoiled, or whatever else you think. I won’t apologize for my life. I’ve had privilege. But everything has a price. I’d give all I had to have had your childhood—a rough and tumble family, a loving dad always around. I lived out of suitcases. My parents, as much as they love each other, barely occupied the same continent. You think you are the only one who cries at night? Who looks for a beauty he cannot see? Do you think I submitted my paintings to your gallery to torment you? Imagine how it feels to paint them—to brush pitiful strokes on a canvas knowing reality mocks you, that you cannot even approach what is really out there. Or in here.”

Regan shook her head. “It’s not true. Your paintings are beautiful. I was just too scared to say so. Too scared of you. Of me. Giovanni, you’re just so real...I don’t know if I can handle you. And I sure as hell don’t deserve you.”

“You let me be the judge,” he growled.

And with that he gave her the fucking of her life. A fucking to surpass all the others combined. She clenched and unclenched, her fists and her pussy, her body aching to meet his, dancing, flesh to flesh, with every stroke. A silent rhythm, hearts and breath commingled. Soaring steadily outside the limits of consciousness. Beyond reason. And dreams.

At last she knew what he meant. What it was to find freedom in chains. To give everything to a lover, to fulfill him with her own bondage.

“Hold me,” said Regan. “Just...hold me.”

He gathered her tightly in his arms. A grip that would not let go. Not stifling, but enveloping and protecting nonetheless. After that, things were hazy. She remembered him unchaining her, cleaning her, caring tenderly for her, much as he had the first time. Only now she did not have to cajole him to lie beside her.

“Finally,” he sighed wearily, stretching out his rock-hard body. “I can sleep.”

But can I? she wondered, the implications unfolding in her mind. *Have I gone too far, she thought, sent the wrong message? What if I wake up, horrified, full of regret?* She couldn't bear that. He didn't deserve it, and neither did the incredible experience they'd just shared.

Forcing herself to stay awake, she listened for the sound of his breathing in the dark. At long last his murmurings ceased and he passed into unconsciousness, his arm draped over her. Such a look of satisfaction on his face. How peacefully he slumbered. Was she that angelic at his age?

When Regan was sure, absolutely sure that he was not going to stir, she made her move. It was her turn—to disappear. To vanish for both their sake's before someone did something really stupid.

Like propose marriage.

Wasn't it bad enough that he kept boasting about claiming her forever? A few more hours of this and she'd be lost. He would, too, though he didn't know it. What he had

was a crush. A few weeks, even a few days from now and they'd both be clearheaded, and very, very thankful for what she was about to do.

"Sleep well," she whispered, blowing him a final kiss, "my sweet prince."

Fully dressed, she walked out, closing the door behind her. Determined to never look back.

Chapter Seven

Giovanni had not pursued her. Regan knew in her head she should be content with that, relieved even, but in her heart there were other feelings. A part of her went so far as to feel a growing anger and resentment as the days passed. Wasn't she worth going after? Why wasn't he furious with her for running off like she had, giving him a dose of his own medicine? Was that all that his fancy words and pledges amounted to—a handful of fucks distributed over two continents?

Karma and Rique had been forbidden to mention the man's name. He was nobody to her, that's all they needed to know. They'd half expected her to talk Sam into refusing Giovanni's exhibition, but in a show of graciousness, she'd agreed to show his work. Actually, it was her hope, on the one hand, to shame the man by behaving kindly toward him, while on the other hand, sending the clear message that she had nothing to fear from him. She had no attachment to him, so why not deal with him professionally?

Coldly, cruelly, and objectively.

Though she still didn't have to tell anyone she liked his work.

"I'm offering them because they will sell," she told her assistants. "Like PT Barnum said—"

They filled in the rest by rote, their singsong tones poking fun at her frequent use of the old maxim.

"We know...no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the public."

Well, it was true, wasn't it? She'd been dumb enough to fall for the man's charms, why not everyone else? Women would lap these paintings up, if for no other reason than to have something on their wall by a man with the looks of Adonis and the silver tongue of Pericles.

They didn't have to know he was shallow, hypocritical. A born heartbreaker. The only good part for her was that the exhibition would be over by tonight. After that, she'd never see or think about Giovanni Bellini-Morgan again.

It was a lie—the thinking part—but weren't all successful lives built on lies? One day she'd have her own gallery. She'd be rich, with a notebook proudly chronicling her trips to every important cultural landmark in the world. All the Seven Wonders and much, much more. And she wouldn't stop, either, not until she'd found something, or someone beautiful enough to erase the man's memory forever.

Rifling through her closet now, she looked for the right dress for the exhibition. Something slinky, so he'd know what he was missing. Something black so he'd know how she felt for him. Something dazzling, so he'd know her life was going on without him. Something with spikes, perhaps, or...

Oh, what's the use, she sighed. Tonight was going to suck, as Karma would put it. A long, dreary time, dealing with a man she no could no longer bear to see. A man who'd done things to her, gone places inside her, opened her up in ways too deep, too dangerous for her own good.

She wiped her eyes. One thing was for sure. She'd get her crying out of the way ahead of time. Hell would freeze over before she'd ever give him the satisfaction of seeing her shedding tears.

* * * * *

Giovanni had never been so nervous in all his life. It wasn't the dozens of wealthy art patrons and critics here to see his work that bothered him, but rather the impending reaction of one woman to one painting. The woman was the love of his life and the painting was his tribute to her, as well as his formal invitation for her to accept him as her man, until death do them part. Most men would buy a ring at a time like this, but Giovanni had decided to express himself in his art.

Rique and Karma had already seen the painting he'd entitled *Angel of Fire*. Both had tears in their eyes. It was, they said, the greatest testimony of love they'd ever witnessed. He hoped they weren't just paying lip service.

Keeping the painting a secret like this, preserving its unveiling for the exhibition, was the riskiest thing Giovanni had ever done in his life. Next to this, fencing and skydiving, auto racing and big-game hunting were nothing. Facing down nature or even one's own fears, it seemed to him, was nothing when compared to dealing with the rejection of the one woman without whom a man's life would be worth nothing.

"It's not good enough." He'd shaken his head at Karma and Rique.

They sought to convince him otherwise, but seeing was believing. In a short while, Sam would unveil the painting and Regan, his *Carina*, would see it. She would either run to him, or run away.

How beautiful she looked tonight. The sight of her had stunned him, robbing the breath from his body. She literally radiated in her silver, off-the-shoulder dress. She had her hair swept up, the red-gold layers shining with a clean brightness that weakened his knees. And those eyes. So purely green. To see her was to want and need her. To be drawn into her orbit with no hope of escape. That body. Those long, slender fingers, the curve of her hips.

He knew every inch of her, but he yearned to see it all again, to live it one more time, and then again and again until his days on earth were through. From the moment he had awoken alone in that hotel room, he had been consumed utterly with Regan's reality. And the unspeakable void she had left behind. To him, it was the warning of the gods, to not squander this one chance at happiness.

Day and night he'd worked on the new painting, finding the lines of her face from memory, the curve of her smile etched in his heart, the heat of her eyes from his own inflamed soul. Regan had set him afire. A blaze that would last a thousand years, burning through all that he was and ever would be.

He had not eaten and he had not slept. He'd painted. And when he was done, he'd called Sam. *I have my masterpiece, he'd said. You may show it, but it is not for sale.*

Giovanni rubbed his palms together. He was clammy with sweat. When would they get started already? Weren't there enough dandies and phonies here to satisfy Sam's pecuniary interests?

"Relax," whispered Rique, coming alongside him. "It's going to work. Trust me."

"I wish I could be so sure," he told the dashing Rique, who looked out of this world in his purple tuxedo jacket, pants and sequined yellow shirt.

"No woman could turn that down," said Karma, wearing a short, turquoise party dress, the color of it closely matching a long streak of color down the center of her hair.

"No man either," added Rique.

"I just want it over with," said Giovanni. "One way or the other."

"Testing, testing," Sam called over the microphone in his gravelly voice. "Can everyone hear me?"

Giovanni's gut clenched like he had a stone sitting dead center. It was time. Regan moved beside Sam, standing between him and the painting. Giovanni's *Angel of Fire* stood waiting on the easel, draped in black velvet. Regan herself was due to pull the covering aside. Sam was talking...how much longer would it be? A few minutes? A few seconds?

Blood pounded in Giovanni's ears. He couldn't make out the words. "Is it too late to run?" he wondered aloud.

"Yes," Rique and Karma said, grabbing his arms for safekeeping. "It is."

* * * * *

Regan wasn't listening to a word Sam was saying. Who cared if Giovanni had another painting? And why did she have to be involved in its unveiling? Let him pull

his own draping. Wasn't it enough that she had to be there tonight, had to look at him, tall and deadly gorgeous in his black tuxedo, good enough to eat? Damn it, couldn't the man look even a little bit less than perfect—just for this one occasion?

Regan felt bad for biting Karma's head off. The poor woman had made the mistake of mentioning how good Giovanni looked all dressed up.

"So why don't you go ask him out?" she'd blurted.

"I will," Rique had volunteered, earning the patented O'Connell stare of death.

"I think Regan needs some alone time," Karma wisely observed, steering Rique off toward the exhibit.

She hated it when her assistant acted more mature than she was. What was the problem, anyway? Giovanni was younger, too, and he'd run circles around her. Why hadn't she been able to keep ahead of things?

Not that it mattered now. Soon enough, this would all be a bad memory, a sick joke.

"Regan," Sam cleared his throat. "If you would...do the honors?"

His voice jarred her from her reverie. It occurred to her that this might not have been the first time he'd asked. Had she tuned the whole thing out of her brain?

Reaching for the velvet, she clutched it tightly and gave a tug. There was a moment of tense silence, then an awed hush. People started pointing, one by one, and then in small groups, smiling and nodding. Regan, who wasn't looking at the painting, had no clue what was going on.

"Regan," exclaimed Sam, his face lit up like a child's. "Why the woman is...you."

Regan's mouth dropped. She whipped her head about to see the portrait, a serene young woman smiling knowingly like a contemporary *Mona Lisa*. It couldn't be. Giovanni couldn't have painted her. For one thing, she'd never sat down and modeled. Still, the hair, as well as the eyes. There was a resemblance, Regan had to admit.

Where the lie came in was in the beauty. "I don't look like that," she said firmly. "I don't look that good."

"You do," came an all-too familiar voice from the crowd. "To me, and everyone else here."

From the left corner, a man began applauding. The clapping spread, until everyone in the room was registering their agreement. Regan's cheeks flushed from pink to red. Giovanni was approaching her, cutting off her escape route, leaving her no choice but to respond civilly.

"I'm going to kill you for this," she smiled as he took both her hands in his.

"I expect you'll try," he acknowledged. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't make some effort."

"I didn't give my permission for this," she reminded, still beaming.

"It comes from my imagination. This you do not own."

"And you don't own me," she replied, her face remaining the very picture of joy.

"No," he admitted. "But I should like to have you."

Oh, fuck. He was getting down on one knee. "Giovanni, don't. This isn't anyone's business."

"I can't help myself, *Carina*. For you, I abandon all caution, all pride. Why should I not tell the world what I feel?"

"You're acting like a fairy tale again," she accused, as if that was really so bad.

"No. I am acting as the man I was born to be. Regan O'Connell," he recited solemnly, "will you marry me, accepting this portrait as a token of my affection, until we find you a ring worthy of your beauty?"

"Yes! Yes!" cried Karma.

"In a heartbeat," echoed Rique.

The audience laughed. It was a safe bet they'd never been to an exhibition like this before, nor would they ever see one this wild again.

"No comments from the peanut gallery!" Sam warned good-naturedly. "So what's it going to be, Regan? Are you going to let this poor man waste away here the rest of his life?"

"If that's how long it takes," Giovanni smiled.

"Marry him," called a well-dressed woman in a gold gown. "You know you want to."

"Yes, marry him," echoed a man with a black suit and pink ascot.

Soon they were all shouting it out, like a roomful of children. Regan found herself in Giovanni's arms, laughing and crying all at once. "I'll marry you," she managed at last. "On the condition that you never pull another stunt like this again."

"I won't, I swear...not until our fifth anniversary at least."

"We won't make it five years if you don't figure out how to slow down just a little, and wait for little old mortal me to catch up," she declared.

"Am I the one who ran off?" he reminded, good-naturedly.

"The second time? No. Although, in my defense, you must admit, a man like you needs to be kept on his toes."

He showered her face with kisses, warm and sweet. "You are just the woman, *Carina*. I knew that the moment I saw you."

"Saw what a klutz I was, you mean."

"I prefer to think of you as a spitfire."

"Think of me as you like," she sighed, burying her head against his chest. "Just promise that you'll never stop thinking of me."

"Never," he wrapped his arm around her back.

"Giovanni?" she asked. "Tell me how to say I love you in Italian."

"*Ti amo*."

"*Ti, amo*, Giovanni." She let the musical sounds roll off her lips. "*Ti amo*, forever and ever."

"I love you, too, *Carina*."

"Thank you for my picture. I don't deserve it."

"Maybe not." He raised an eyebrow. "And if that's the case, I have all the excuse I need to hold it over your pretty hide for the rest of your life."

"That's 'hold it over my head', Ace. Or 'take it out of my hide'. You pick. Metaphors are pay-one-price the rest of today."

Giovanni settled her sassiness with a kiss. "Later," he promised. "We will establish a wonderful metaphor. Your ass and my hand."

"Promise?" She grinned.

"Count on it."

Regan snuggled against him. Her man. Her artist. Her Sir.

* * * * *

Her arms were lifted over her head, according to his whim. Giovanni removed the dress, lifting it straight off of her slinky, lean body. She had a slip and bra and panties beneath it, though these items would not remain long on her person.

"From the second I saw you at the gallery tonight, I knew I would be doing this to you."

"Really?" she teased. "That makes one of us. Up until you pulled that little picture ploy, you were nowhere close to getting any."

"As if you could stop me," he teased her back, lifting the slip just as he had the dress.

"Leave your arms," he told her, as she stood before him in just the white silk bra and panties.

Regan maintained the position of surrender, giving him full access to her curves.

"You won't always get what you want from me," she informed him. "I intend to make a point of saying no to you every now and again just to keep you honest."

Giovanni's hand slipped beneath the waistband of her panties. His hand was warm and alive over her moist, throbbing vulva. "And I will make it a point to bring you frequently to your knees...just to keep you honest."

Her knees buckled. This was rapidly approaching being one of those times. "If it's a battle of wills you want," she bluffed. "You'll get more than you bargained for."

"And how do you know, *Carina*, what I've bargained for?" His fingers slid into her slit. "Move," he ordered. "Move against my hand."

Regan obeyed, already half-gone with her need to succumb.

"Are you going to be a good slave?" he inquired. "Or do I have to punish you first?"

"I'll be good," she swore.

"Show me."

Regan took her place on her knees. In seconds she had Giovanni's cock out and in her mouth.

"Make it hard," he encouraged. "It's going in your ass next."

But it was hard already. Harder than she remembered. How fitting it should be this way, the third time, in their third hotel room, in celebration of their engagement. And a unique engagement it was. Sealed in lust and domination, in play and surprise and magic.

"I'm going to take you on all fours, *Carina*, on the bed. You'll offer up your behind to me and I will conquer it, finding my pleasure...and yours, too."

Sure he would, if he didn't come in her mouth first. It was a very real possibility, the way he was pulsing and moving about. For her part, she didn't care. She'd take him according to his needs, whatever they were, and he would never leave her out of the

equation. He loved her. She had the painting to prove it. As if everything he'd done so far hadn't been enough.

All of it, even the seemingly cold things, were done out of his humble adoration. She saw that now. All along, his destiny had been intertwining with hers. As easily as his cock fit in her mouth. Or in her pussy. Or even her ass.

"To the bed," he ordered.

"Yes," she said with enthusiasm. "Sir."

Regan crawled, her nerve endings electric with the possibilities. She had never felt so nude, despite the covering of underwear. Her pussy throbbed, her nipples were swollen against the bra cups. Her knees tingled as she moved into her place, palms pressed down, already damp with anticipation. He was going to take her, just as he'd promised. And she would yield herself up...and enjoy it.

"*Carina*," he whispered, playing his hand over her tight behind. She gripped the bedsheets, and moaned in readiness. Her pussy already dripping, but what about the other place?

Giovanni tugged her panties down to the tops of her thighs, baring her ass. She was helpless to resist. Moving with arrogant ownership, he slid his hand over her ass, and ran his fingers along her crack, then down to test the moisture of her pussy.

Yes...that was what she needed. He could make her come this way if he wanted. But he was only after the moisture he needed to ready her other entrance...just as he had promised.

It was her tight, posterior hole he was after.

"It's okay, my love," he whispered when she shivered at his touch. "Just let go. Surrender."

This she could do—to the sound of his voice, to the touch of his commanding hand. She felt her opening relax.

"Good girl," he praised, placing a kiss on the side of her neck.

She soaked in the compliment, and the touch of his lips. Oh, god, she would never get enough of this man, she was sure of it.

"You are so beautiful," he marveled, unhooking her bra from behind, and sliding the straps forward over her shoulders.

Her bared breasts trembled, begging his touch, his masterful squeeze. Anything at all he that might wish to do to them. But her breasts would have to wait.

The next thing she knew, she heard him unzip. His breathing had grown ragged by now. He was stripping. She cried softly with joy as she felt him, a moment later, settle his wondrously hard cock between her cheeks, positioned for entry.

This was it—she was going to be fucked in the ass. Her pussy clenched as though already filled. He pushed, just a little, leaning forward. "Yes," he sighed.

She cried out as he claimed the first inch, breaching her, deliciously. It was like regular sex only more intense, more deeply fulfilling.

"More," she pleaded. "Sir, show me more." Oh, yes, he was inside her, over her, filling that deepest, most taboo place of hers. Penetrating inch after glorious inch, until she barely knew where her body left off and his began. Together, bonded in sweat, finding fulfillment in each other's breath. It was this, the most intimate act between two human beings that sealed the deal. The deal of love. Of a life together, forever, on the express train, the *rapido* to paradise.

"Carina," he cried, as he came, his fingers in her sex ensuring her own simultaneous orgasm. "My Carina."

"Yes," she moaned, her life fulfilled when she heard those two words. "Your Carina."

About the Author

Reese Gabriel is a born romantic with a taste for the edgier side of love. Having traveled the world and sampled many of the finer things, Reese now enjoys the greater simplicities; barefoot walks by the ocean, kisses under moonlight and whispers of passion in the darkness with that one special person.

Preferring to remain behind the scenes, cherished by a precious few, Reese hopes to awaken in the lives of many the possibilities of true love through stories of far off places and enchanted lives.

For the sake of love and hope and imagination, these stories are told. May they be enjoyed as much in the reading of them as in the writing.

Reese Gabriel welcomes mail from readers. You can write to Reese c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Ave., Akron OH 44310.

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