

Chapter 1

Niccolo moved swiftly through the dark streets of his adopted town. He had excellent night vision and a sharp memory so the sense of walking through a maze, that many people experienced when in Venice, wasn't a problem for him. He knew exactly where he was and the most direct course to reach his rooms. After all, it was a path that he had followed often over the past several years. His heart was at the small museum where he was a volunteer curator; his rooms were on the other side of the small city, near the center of all the major buildings and where everything important occurred, Piazza San Marco. It was late; most of the permanent inhabitants had retired to their homes, leaving the streets to the tourists.

He'd have been home as well, enjoying a glass of something nice while reading a book. But, instead, he had agreed to be the one to open the museum and conduct a private tour for a high-powered wealthy potential donor whose schedule didn't allow him to view the place during normal hours like everyone else. The man hadn't bothered to acknowledge that he had inconvenienced anyone or even to thank Niccolo for giving up his evening to accommodate the request for a late night tour of the small townhouse that had once been the home of local favorite painter, Pietro Longhi and was now a small museum, displaying his less famous works. The major works were in museums and art galleries around the world and apparently Mr. Agapos had been to see them all, working his way down to the pieces that he had come to view tonight.

Niccolo rubbed his hands together briskly against the late winter cold as he strode rapidly along. He didn't mind not being thanked. He was happy to give up an evening if it meant new funds coming into the privately operated museum that was perpetually functioning on a shoestring budget. He snorted softly at his thoughts; he was even starting to think in American idioms, he should do fine during his next assignment in the States. But that was many months away, and for now, he could focus his attention on his beloved Louisa.

He knew Dominic was concerned about his obsession, as his cousin called it, but Niccolo saw no reason to change. He wasn't likely to become the next Santa; Dominic seemed to be on the lead candidate for that, and Niccolo was happy to remain as his main supporter. Dominic was

married to an adorable little woman who was part elf and had begun displaying some interesting abilities. They would most likely have children with strong magic, protecting the future of the family. Plus, he had three other cousins who could also marry and have offspring to keep the line strong. If he chose not to marry and to spend his life adoring a woman who had lived over 200 years ago, then it was no one else's business but his own.

His steps slowed as his mind's eye recalled his favorite image of Louisa. It wasn't often displayed, but Mr. Agapos had been insistent that he see everything and Niccolo had been instructed to do all he could to please the man. So Niccolo had unlocked the special vault and they had spent several hours going through every drawing, study and sketch that had been preserved. They had first toured the building and looked at all the oils that were on the walls throughout the house, along with many of the more complete drawings. But Longhi had been prolific and there were simply too many pieces to display them all. Plus many were merely a few strokes of pencil or charcoal on paper and deemed of insufficient interest to be granted prime wall space when insurance rates were sky high. So they were kept in the vault.

There was a sheet of paper with several studies of Louisa, mostly quick pencil sketches of Louisa's hand or her foot or raised eyebrow or mouth. Louisa was seen full on, in profile, and from behind, looking over her shoulder at the viewer. This was the single most special item in the museum, as far as Niccolo was concerned, and why he had worked for free for so many years. The artist had stockpiled drawings of close-ups of various parts of her and posed in numerous positions and then had used these as filler in many of his oil paintings and drawings meant to be seen by the public. Bits and pieces of Louisa could be found in many of Longhi's works and Niccolo was always able to spot her. Rarely was she one of the featured subjects, but she was often found in a crowd, or off in a corner and Niccolo's eye was always drawn to her. His heart always recognized her and he knew that he could love no other woman.

He rounded the corner and entered the vast Piazza San Marco. He had rooms off a much smaller square on the far side and he never failed to enjoy observing the people as he traversed the main tourist attraction in the city. Tonight he could see that the dueling orchestras at cafes Florian and Quadri had finished playing and were in the process of packing up. There were still many small groups of people scattered among the tables that were filled during the daylight hours. Demand for a table was so great that the owners were able to collect rather high cover fees

just for sitting down at one, along with hefty prices on the food and drink they offered. And business was good; both cafes had been in operation for a very long time.

Niccolo's heart leapt as his eyes were drawn to a scene on the other side of the broad expanse of tables. It was as if Longhi's painting, *The Tickle* had come to life and Louisa was there in the flesh. Two women stood behind a man who was sitting sprawled in a chair. It was clear that they were intent on achieving some act of mischief, their faces were animated and Niccolo fancied that he could hear their tinkling giggles carrying through the crisp clear winter air.

He increased his pace until he was almost on the verge of breaking into a very undignified run. He obviously had his mind on Louisa tonight and was projecting his thoughts onto random women. He needed to get close enough to see the details of her face and know that it was not Louisa, or he would not be able to sleep tonight.

The two women did something behind the back of the man; Niccolo wasn't able to tell what it was. But the victim suddenly came up out of his chair with a roar and the women scattered. He snagged the nearest mischief-maker, the blonde that made Niccolo think of Louisa, and promptly bent her over his hip, landing several sharp smacks on her bottom. He released her abruptly and stalked after the other woman, whom he quickly caught and pulled over his lap in a nearby chair for a slightly more sustained spanking. Then he claimed a hand from each woman and marched them towards one of the many streets that exited from the piazza. They were gone before Niccolo could reach them.

Despite his frustration at missing a view of their faces, he couldn't help but to chuckle as he remembered how each woman had used her free hand to reach back and attempt to rub away the sting their quick spankings had earned them as they were led away. His cock stirred in envy. Lucky man, with two shapely bottoms to spank!

After a fruitless search around the table that the trio had occupied, Niccolo was forced to admit that they hadn't left behind anything that would identify them or help him track them down and he went home to his empty bed for a long sleepless night.

Two days later, Niccolo was crossing San Marco Piazza again, his eyes automatically going to the table where he had seen the woman who had made him think of Louisa. He grumbled softly to himself that he'd probably never be able to be in the area again without

checking for her. He was grateful when a large tourist group moved by, breaking his line of sight. It seemed that each year there were more and more special events just for the tourists to feel like they had experienced Carnevale. This group was no doubt off to a special dinner and ball; many were staged by various companies purely for the purpose of selling tickets to the tour organizations. Most of the tourists were in costume and chattering excitedly, the women spreading out their elaborate skirts and twirling to show them off, most of the men considerably less thrilled with their outfits.

Niccolo guessed that the men were probably very happy for their masks, although he knew from experience that they could be very uncomfortable, especially when one has been dancing for awhile. He remembered the days when his parents had insisted that he participate in every dance so that there would be sufficient partners for all the ladies present, no matter that he was still a boy, albeit a tall one. But that had been many years ago. His parents had perished in a horrific boating accident in the waters off Spain and he had gone to live with his aunt and uncle at the North Pole, his true home, as he had inherited the special gene through his mother, just like all his cousins.

When he had felt ready to go off on his own as an adult, he had returned to Venice and taken rooms in a converted palazzo that had once been owned by his father's family. He liked that he lived within the walls where his ancestors had previously walked, although there were none around now. Since he worked in his mother's family business and used her last name, he didn't really have much of a connection to his paternal side. A few rooms were sufficient since he was often gone for a month or two at Christmas time and he was always welcome to stay in the bachelor quarters at Home. Some bucks chose to stay there year round rather than pay for lodging elsewhere and all the married couples were given houses. Dominic and Marcie were busy overseeing the design and construction of theirs. Since Niccolo didn't expect to ever marry, he hadn't given any thought to that experience.

Something about one of the twirling women tourists caught his eye and he was instantly brought back to Louisa again. The woman had struck a pose just like his darling love in one of Longhi's paintings of a gambling hall. Another woman joined hands with her and they did a quick dance together, until a man gave each of them a smack on their rear end and launched them off after the tour group that was rapidly leaving them behind. It had to be the same trio

from the other night. Niccolo couldn't recall ever seeing a man spank a woman in public before, and this man had now done it twice, times two women.

If only he could follow after them and find out who they were and see the women's faces. Twice now the blonde had made him think of Louisa. Would that feeling grow stronger or be dispelled if he met her in person?

Unfortunately, he was now late, his daydreaming having slowed his pace. Mr. Agapos had apparently taken a liking to him and had demanded his presence at a private dinner and ball. And where there was money that might be donated to the museum, he was bound and determined to do his best to make the man happy.

So he had donned the custom made outfit that he always wore for Carnevale, put his hat on his head, his mask in his coat pocket and picked up the walking stick he always used when dressed in costume. It was one that his father had carried, a family piece going back unknown generations, and it concealed a sword, something that had fascinated him as a child. Now that it was his, he had added a loop to his belt to hold the stick when he was dancing, being unwilling to leave it behind at a table.

He still felt a tremendous sense of obligation to dance with as many women as possible, in tribute to his parents' wishes, and he wondered whether Mr. Agapos expected him to stay by the man's side the whole evening. Niccolo saw little point in attending a ball if you weren't planning to dance. But he would do his best to remember that the reason he was there was to give Mr. Agapos what he wanted, so that hopefully, Mr. Agapos would give the museum what it needed, cash.

He found the address, showed the invitation that had been hand delivered to his rooms earlier in the day, and strolled inside the private palazzo, donning his mask as he went up the stairs to the first floor. The elderly host and hostess were waiting at the top of the steps to greet their guests and Niccolo spoke with them for a few minutes, discovering that they had known his father's family. He promised to return at a later date to have a quiet visit and a better opportunity to exchange old stories. They pointed him in the direction of the card room, where they thought Mr. Agapos was engaged in playing whist and wished the museum buona fortuna.

Niccolo wondered how much money he was going to have to lose at whist in order for the museum to receive a donation and whether his time would be better spent just writing them a check. But then he realized that he would always wonder what the tycoon would have donated

that would be lost if he didn't do his best now. "Buona Sera, good evening, Signore Agapos." He accompanied the greeting with a bow appropriate for the event and the clothes they were wearing.

The older man turned and looked him up and down. "You're off duty, call me Eric, please. Who are you supposed to be? Don't tell me that you are Casanova too."

Niccolo chuckled. "I see that you are aware that he once lived in this beautiful city and, no doubt, are wise to the fact that the ladies all love to announce that they have danced with Casanova. You shall not want for partners tonight. I confess that I have claimed that identity before, but tonight I've been thinking of family. I'm dressed as one of my ancestors, perhaps the one who originally carried this walking stick." He brandished the mentioned item and then, turning so that no one else could see, demonstrated how the release worked to free the sword. "It is a long standing family tradition to carry this during Carnevale, when the late night streets can be more dangerous than usual. So many revelers wandering about can bring out the worst in men."

"Hmm," the man was studying his cards, re-arranging their order in his hand, "I'd have thought the concept of your family costume would result in a completely different image." He glanced up and caught Niccolo's surprised and then thunderous expression and hurried on. "Never mind my blatherings. I'm distracted by this hand, it's piss poor. I'd rather dance." He stood and tossed his cards down on the table. "I apologize, gentlemen, I fold." He strode towards the door leading into the ballroom, where the musicians had begun to play.

Niccolo exchanged a horrified look with the others at the table, and then shrugged in silent apology before trotting off after the man. "Sir, you don't fold in whist..."

Eric had made a beeline for two very attractive women standing together and Niccolo caught up with him just as he made an elegant bow. "Ladies, I am Casanova and this is the Conte." Niccolo hurriedly bowed to the women, wondering whether it was a lucky guess that Agapos had used the ancient family title. Eric waited for Niccolo to finish his bow and then offered his hand to the giggling brunette, leaving the blonde to his sidekick. "Shall we dance?"

"How can I refuse the famous Casanova?" she tittered.

"I *am* the ultimate authority on love," he acknowledged as he swept her onto the dance floor.

Niccolo quickly slid his swordstick into its special carrying loop and offered his hand. “May I, Milady?”

She nodded her head graciously as she placed her hand in his. “With pleasure, good Conte.”

“Ah no, Bella, the pleasure is all mine.” He gave her his best dazzling smile and then took her in his arms, moving them easily into the pattern of dancers as they waltzed in a flowing, twirling circle around the sizeable wooden floor.

The same sequence repeated over and over throughout the evening. After each dance, Eric would approach another pair of ladies, simple good manners forcing Niccolo to accompany him, and never allowing the younger man to wander off to select his own partner.

When the musicians finally took a break, Eric stepped away from his partner and put his hand on Niccolo’s shoulder, forcing him to turn from the woman he was thanking. “Come along, it’s time to talk business.” He ignored the surprised look on the faces of the women who had expected to be asked to accompany their partners into the room with refreshments and headed out of the ballroom.

Once again, Niccolo sent an apologetic look before trotting after the man. He quickly realized that they were moving away from the public rooms open for the evening and down the hall towards the hosts’ private quarters. “Sir, I don’t think we’re supposed to be here. This area is not available for our use as guests.”

The tycoon opened a door and decisively entered the room that was clearly the owner’s private office. “It’s fine. Come in and close the door.” He moved to the decanter of brandy sitting on a table between a pair of wing chairs and poured two glasses. Then he opened a mahogany box also sitting on the table and took out a cigar. “Do you want one?” Niccolo shook his head. “Sit, drink your brandy and listen to my proposition.”

Angry at being forced into such a breach of good manners as to go into another man’s private domain and drink his liquor without the man being present to extend the invitation, and resentful of being ordered about by this man who apparently had no understanding of proper behavior, Niccolo remained standing. “Sir, I don’t think that I am interested in hearing your proposition. I bid you—”

“Louisa.” Agapos nodded with satisfaction when the younger man’s mouth snapped closed and he sat down. “I am putting together an exposition of all the works by Longhi with

Louisa in them. I've managed to convince the museums with relevant paintings to loan their pieces. I want you to be in charge of the whole thing. I am aware that personal financial enticement won't work with you, so I propose to pay the museum here fifty thousand euro per month in compensation for losing your volunteer services while you oversee the exhibit."

Niccolo closed his eyes with a silent groan. The man certainly knew his weaknesses. There was no way that he could refuse the museum an opportunity to receive that kind of money. And there was no way that he could step aside and allow another person to take care of Louisa. If this exhibition was really going to happen, then he wanted, no, needed to be there and he could not turn his back on the opportunity to be the one in charge. "I have other obligations over the holiday season. When and where do you plan to have this event? How long would you require my services?"

Eric waved his hand in dismissal. "I wouldn't dream of interfering with your family obligations, I understand the duties forced upon us by who we are. A great deal of the preliminary preparatory work has already been done. The exhibit will be held during the sestercentennial – that's 250 years – celebration of Christmas, Ohio, this summer. Then, allowing some time to make sure that all the works are properly packed up and returned to their home galleries, you should be finished in plenty of time for the holidays and the museum here should be richer by several hundred thousands of euros."

"Why this place in Ohio? I've never heard of it." Niccolo was convinced that the man knew about his connection to Santa Claus and he wasn't sure what to do about it. He'd never been in a situation like this before.

Agapos smiled. "I thought you knew. You've made her the subject of so much of your attention. Christmas, Ohio is where Louisa lived, raised a large family and died, after she ran away from her family here in Italy. She married the man who founded the town and the citizens are all quite eager to see what their famous ancestress looked like, so I've arranged this as my gift to the town in honor of such a momentous occasion."

"She ran away to America? The records don't say what happened to her. She just disappears. I thought that she must have died in one of the epidemics that periodically occurred."

"Her family was so angry and embarrassed that she ran off after being betrothed to an elderly merchant, that they refused to speak of her again. No one was permitted to mention her and they removed her name from all family records."

“How did she manage to travel all that way? The last images of her show her to be a young woman.”

“I believe that her journals are held in the town archives. I’m certain that they will allow you, as curator of the exhibit about her, to have access to them. You’ll be able to read them to learn the answers to all your questions.”

“Why me? How did you decide to ask me to do this?”

“I heard of your deep interest in Louisa and knew that you would have a level of dedication that no one else could match.”

“How? Where did you hear about my interest?”

“Your cousin, Dominic, mentioned it to me.”

Niccolo was on his feet in an instant. The sense of betrayal was so strong he thought he might burst a blood vessel. “I am sorry, I can’t deal with this right now. Excuse me.” He abruptly left the room. But instead of turning in the direction of the ball, he randomly opened another door off the hallway and stepped inside. As soon as he was positive that no one was present to witness his actions, he focused his thoughts on the red arrival circle at the North Pole and transported Home.