

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Rossetti Letter

Christi Phillips

The Hanged Man

3 March 1618

Her hands looked unnaturally pale in the moonlight. For a moment, Alessandra forgot the bitter wind that kicked up an icy spray off the lagoon, and regarded her hands as though they belonged to someone else: a conspicuous ridge of bone-white knuckle, with pallid veins that were faintly visible through milky flesh. As they approached the Ponte San Biagio, she realized how tense she was, how tightly she gripped the edge of the gondola. Calm yourself, she thought, and released her grasp. You must be calm. She reclined against the seat cushions, assuming a relaxed posture she did not feel, and the coarse fabric of her costume bunched uncomfortably against her back. She chose to ignore it. If Nico sees that you are uneasy, he will insist that you return home.

Her manservant steered them into the Rio dell' Arsenale, leaving behind the lagoon where they'd hugged the shore since leaving her house at the southeast end of the city. The canal was empty and quiet, devoid of movement and light, save for the silent passage of the gondola and an occasional torchlight that trembled in the black water. The houses along both sides were shuttered and dark. They would remain that way until morning, while the inhabitants celebrated elsewhere: in the Piazza, in the smaller public squares, in the palaces along the Grand Canal. The end of Carnival was only three days away. After weeks of celebration, the revelry had built to a frenzy, as in the tale of a bewitched princess who danced for days and nights without rest. When morning dawned on Ash Wednesday, fragile and silver fogged, all of Venice would fall into a limitless sleep, as if under an enchantment.

They turned into the Rio di San Martino, then into a narrow waterway that circled west toward the Piazzetta dei Leoncini. In their wake, small waves gently slapped against stone foundations smothered in clumps of thick, glistening moss. She could reach out and brush the damp stone with her fingertips if she desired, so close were the buildings, and she inhaled their familiar grotto scent with a kind of reverence. Traveling through Venice at night always filled her with a rising excitement, but tonight her anticipation was tinged with fear. Alessandra tried not to think about what waited for her at the end of her journey, which was quickly approaching.

Already she could hear strains of music. Then came an indeterminate cry -- of fear, passion, or laughter? -- that echoed off stone walls and was abruptly silenced, leaving once again the oar's rhythmic squeak and splash. Soon there appeared a harbinger of the celebration at the city's center: a single gondola with a red lantern at its bow glided slowly toward them. Seated within it were two velvet-breeched men wearing the masks of pagan gods, and two elegant courtesans with feathered headdresses that resembled exotic birds, whose ruby lips and bejeweled throats gleamed in the rosy light. As the gondola passed, these fantastic creatures turned to regard her with a languid curiosity; then one of the strange, hybrid women wet her rouged mouth with her tongue and reached out her hand in silent invitation.

Alessandra felt as if she were merely a spectator at a passing show. Then she and Nico were swallowed by the shadow of a bridge and disgorged again, and all at once they were enveloped by music and light and laughter, a riot of color and strange costume, as the crowds along Calle Canonica pressed into the Piazza. Nico halted the gondola and exchanged a wordless look with Alessandra before she stepped onto the fondamenta and rushed away.

The Piazza was bright with torchlight, alive with music and revelry, but she could not join the general high spirits; the sinister maw that waited for her in the dark courtyard of the Doge's Palace filled her with dread. The bocca di leone, the lion's mouth, was a special receptacle created by the Venetian government to receive letters of denunciation. Into this bronze plaque went accusations of theft, murder, or tax evasion -- the last a particularly heinous crime according to the Great Council, the Republic's ruling assembly of two thousand noblemen. Alessandra had never imagined, until recently, that she would ever avail herself of it. Behind the bocca di leone's grotesque, gaping mouth lurked every terror hidden within the depths of the palace, the prison, and the Republic itself; surely unleashing that terror was a fearsome act not to be done with indifference.

As she pushed her way through the crowds, she was aware of the letter tucked inside the small purse tied at her waist. It bore both her personal seal and her signature. The Great Council paid no heed to anonymous letters, to discourage using the bocca di leone as a way of striking at one's enemies. Soon the marquis and his coconspirators would know who had exposed their plan, and her life would be in danger. But how could she do other than what she had set out to do tonight? The Republic was in peril. It was her civic duty to place the letter in the lion's mouth, to set the wheels of justice in motion. If she failed, more lives than just her own would be lost.

Alessandra summoned her courage and moved toward the Porta della Carta, the dark archway that led to the palace courtyard, then abruptly stopped, startled by something that had caught at the edge of her vision.

Between the two great marble columns at the foot of the Piazzetta, a dead man hung limply against a background of starless sky. His limbs were broken, his face bloodied, his bruised flesh barely covered by dirty, tattered rags. Although he was suspended on a gibbet directly above the gaming tables that crowded the space

between the two columns, not one of the many costumed revelers below took notice of him.

Stirred by a gust of wind, the hanged man turned slowly on the cord that had snapped his neck. Light from a bonfire below animated his blank, staring eyes; flickering shadows played across his mouth and turned his death's grimace into a grin. Alessandra stood transfixed, as it appeared that the hanged man was still alive. She imagined that he spoke to her, his warning delivered in a harsh whisper: It could be you at the end of this rope, if you do not deliver that letter...but here is the fate of the one you love if you do.

I am damned with the Devil's own choice, Alessandra thought, but as for the one I love...she looked again at the hanged man, and it was suddenly clear that all life had left him. Just a body at the end of a rope, no more, no less, not common, but not uncommon, either. She had seen hanged men before in this very place; she knew well they did not speak. She shook her head to rid herself of the apparition and turned away. The sooner she got on with her task and was away, the better.

As for the one she loved...well, he did not love her, did he? Still, her step was slow as she walked toward the Porta della Carta. The Devil's own choice, she thought, and slipped through the archway into the shadowed, silent courtyard.

Chapter One

"...by 1618, Venice was past the apogee of its empire," Claire Donovan said as she shuffled an index card to the bottom of the stack, resisting an urge to fan herself with it. The Harriot Historical Society meeting room felt stiflingly hot. From her position at the podium, Claire saw that her audience was also suffering from the unseasonably warm weather. Program notes doubled as fans, and handkerchiefs were dabbed at brows and throats.

"Although the Republic was still a major power, it was surrounded by enemies: the Turkish Empire, France, and, most notably, Spain, the richest and most powerful country in the western world, and the dominant force in Italy. Italy was not the united country we know today, but a disparate group of territorial states, many of them under Spanish control, ruled by a Spanish viceroy or governor. The Venetian Republic stood alone in its independence; along with its fabled wealth and beauty, this vulnerability only served to tantalize those determined to conquer her.

"The duke of Ossuna set his sights upon Venice soon after assuming the viceroyalty of Milan in 1616," she continued. "But he knew he could not take the Republic on his own. He enlisted the help of the Spanish ambassador, the marquis of Bedmar..." She paused, distracted, as a bead of perspiration slid down her neck and underneath her collar. God, she was hot. It didn't help that she'd dressed up for the occasion of her first public lecture, exchanging her usual T-shirt and khakis for a skirt, blazer, and blouse; or that her long, fawn-colored hair was hanging loose instead of tied back into a neat, and much cooler, braid. She glanced at her notes on the 1618 Spanish Conspiracy against Venice, trying to regain her place and her rhythm.

"The marquis of Bedmar," she began again, then stopped as she heard a soft, wheezing whisper from somewhere in the audience. It was followed by the creak of metal folding chairs, the rustle of bodies, a few dry, muffled coughs. They weren't exactly enraptured, Claire realized, feeling a sudden flush of self-consciousness. One instant her thoughts had been on her scribbled notes, the words in her mind, and the images she envisioned: seventeenth-century Venice, Alessandra Rossetti on her fateful trip to the bocca di leone. The next instant she was just someone standing in front of a small group of people she hardly knew, feeling much too hot and not quite sure of what she was doing.

This didn't bode well for her future success. If she couldn't give a captivating talk to the members of the Harriot Historical Society, how would she ever present her doctoral dissertation to her adviser, the notoriously caustic Claudius Hilliard, and the rest of the Harvard committee who would watch her with judgmental, silent stares?

She took a sip of water from the plastic cup on the podium and looked up from her index cards. Elroy Dugan was fast asleep, but the other audience members still seemed interested. They were all women, all well over seventy years old, and they all looked up at her with expressions of encouraging expectation. Maybe her lecture wasn't going quite as badly as she'd imagined.

Claire smiled at them and brushed the perspiration from her brow. "The marquis of Bedmar, Spanish ambassador to Venice..." she said, her voice trailing off. Odd. Her notes were blurry. Her ears suddenly seemed to be stuffed with cotton. Her legs felt shaky, her head woozy. She gripped the sides of the podium to steady herself.

In the front row, Mrs. Branford Biddle, the historical society's director, leaned forward, looking concerned.

"Venice..." Claire began once more, and wondered why Mrs. Biddle seemed to be lunging straight at her.

"Miss Donovan." A woman was speaking to her. Why couldn't she answer? "Miss Donovan, please stick out your tongue." It seemed an odd but perfectly reasonable request, so she complied.

Claire not only heard but felt someone walking toward her. She understood then that she was lying on the floor, which was rather uncomfortable. Why was she lying on the floor? And why was she sticking out her tongue?

"Why is she sticking out her tongue?" Mrs. Biddle asked. Even in Claire's confused state, Mrs. Biddle's voice was unmistakable: it had the grating edge of a woman who was accustomed to having things her own way.

"I was afraid she might swallow it," the first woman answered. "It can happen when people faint."

I fainted? Claire opened her eyes. The historical society's secretary, Adela Crenshaw, was kneeling beside her, gently patting her left hand. The other society members stood behind Adela in a concerned semicircle.

"Can it?" asked Mrs. Biddle, entirely unconvinced.

"I learned about it from a CPR course on the internet." Adela turned back to Claire and saw that she was conscious. "Ah, there she is."

"I fainted?" Claire asked. Adela smiled radiantly at her. But it was Mrs. Biddle, still standing over them, who answered.

"Yes, you fainted. Passed out cold and toppled like a ton of bricks. Good thing I caught you. And very good thing I spent my youth breaking in wild Arabians" -- horses, Claire wondered, or people? -- "or I would be a frail old lady lying underneath you with a broken hip. Okay, everyone, show's over. She's fine. Please help yourselves to iced tea and cookies in the reception area."

The others moved away to the vestibule as Adela and Mrs. Biddle helped Claire to her feet.

"This will make a very interesting story for the next newsletter," Mrs. Biddle said. "Wouldn't you say, Adela?"

"Very interesting. No one's ever passed out at the podium before," Adela explained.

Not for the first time did Claire reflect on the drawbacks of living in a town with fewer than a thousand inhabitants. Although she loved its Cape Cod locale and waterside ambience, loved that she could walk to the post office and the library and the General Store (and that there was a store actually named General Store), it was not possible to live an entirely private life in Harriott. Claire was certain that everyone would know she'd fainted while giving a talk to a small group of geriatrics, long before the historical society newsletter came out.

"Even Joshua Deerbottom," Mrs. Biddle broke in on her thoughts, "who is ninety-three years old, made it through his entire lecture on the Battle of Buzzards Bluff without once falling over. You're such a young thing, we did expect you to be able to stand for at least twenty minutes or so. You seem to be well enough."

If she were to rate her level of embarrassment from one to ten, Claire figured that she was hovering right around a nine.

Mrs. Biddle looked her over carefully. "Are you pregnant?"

And this was ten. "No."

"Well, there must be a reason."

"I think I just got too hot."

They had started toward the vestibule when Adela exclaimed brightly, "I almost forgot. We have something to show you." Claire followed them to the historical society office.

"Bitsy, do you know where I put it?" asked Adela, addressing Mrs. Biddle as Claire marveled that the petite but formidable woman should ever be spoken to so familiarly.

"Put what?" Mrs. Biddle said.

"The printout of that article I found on the internet. The one about Venice." Adela rifled through a few stacks of paper on her desk. "Oh, here it is." She handed two pages to Claire. "It seemed very much like the subject of your lecture."

VENICE CONFERENCE TO FEATURE NEW STUDIES IN VENETIAN HISTORY, the headline read. The article, from the online edition of the International Herald Tribune, announced that the upcoming five-day conference was being hosted by the Department of History at the University Ca' Foscari and would be attended by historians from all over Europe.

"Look at the second page, dear."

Claire turned to the second page of the article. Adela had kindly bracketed the crucial paragraph:

"Highlights of the conference include visiting history professor Andrea Kent of Trinity College, Cambridge, whose book in progress, *The Spanish Conspiracy of 1618*, will provide the subject matter for two lectures."

"Oh my god," Claire gasped. She would have sat down in shock except for the fact that there was only one chair in the room, and Adela was already in it.

"Maybe you should go and reveal passages from your book, too," said Adela encouragingly.

Even if she could afford a trip to Venice, there wasn't a chance she'd be asked to give a paper there. She wasn't a professor; she didn't even have her doctorate yet. But that wasn't her most important concern. What would happen if Andrea Kent's book was published before her dissertation was completed? She had believed the Spanish Conspiracy to be so obscure that her dissertation was unique -- a crucial quality if she were going to stand out in the crowd of new Ph.D.s competing for a handful of teaching positions. This book was disturbing news indeed; its very existence could ruin her life.

"Do you have any more information on this conference?" Claire asked.

"I'm sorry, no," Adela replied. "I just happened to come across this while I was looking for something else."

"I can guess what you were looking for," Mrs. Biddle harrumphed.

"And what's wrong with it? I've met some very nice gentlemen on the internet. In fact, I have a date for brunch on Sunday."

"That's five dates in three weeks," Mrs. Biddle said indignantly. "You're an eighty-year-old nymphomaniac."

"I am not," Adela protested. "I'm seventy-nine."