

INFAMOUS

By
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CHAPTER ONE

It was Carnival in Venice.

Mardi Gras on the corner of Bourbon and Royal.

Tonight was pure Hollywood—and she was buying back in.

Jessica Sinclair stood in a scene straight out of one of her books--beautiful people, champagne, a posh ballroom in one of the city's most exclusive hotels. The entire room had been transformed for the night into a romantic Hollywood fantasy of Carnival, complete with backdrops of old-world streets and frescoed balconies. There was even the enigmatic hero--remote and aloof in black tie.

She spotted him the moment he entered the room. He paused in the doorway just as she looked up. For a second, all the sound in the crowded ballroom receded and it was just the two of them in a vast well of silence. Someone jostled her elbow, and all the noise and revelry crashed back in around her.

"Excuse me," she said to the man next to her. "I need to have a word with Kate while she's still coherent."

She spent the next hour circulating. Laughing. Chatting. Dancing. Through it all, her eyes found him in the crowd—as though he were the only solid thing in the room and everyone else merely butterflies flitting in and out of his orbit.

She grimaced at the fanciful thought. She was in an odd mood, but hadn't she come here to step, at least for the night, back into the fantasy? With her latest book off to the publisher, she was due an evening of indulgence. Only somehow, it was harder than she had expected to ignore the Styrofoam and spray paint and enjoy the pretty façade.

In the old days, she would have started the party well before she hit the ballroom and not counted it a success until every eye was on her. Tonight, when she should be letting loose, she caught herself automatically storing away information, impressions, and snippets of conversation. Half of Hollywood would give their eyeteeth to be at this party, and she felt like the narrator in one of her own books—an integral part of the story, but not an actual player. She spotted a dark head in the crowd and felt a little frisson of excitement.

It wasn't fair. In this crowd, he should blend right into the woodwork. Was he even handsome? He didn't have the glossy kind of image most of her male friends cultivated or even the scruffy bad-boy look that was so sexy. His dark hair was cut in a style that screamed boardroom rather than bedroom. Even the Armani tux was the most conservative cut available. He should have been completely unremarkable here amid the glittering throng. Instead, he was the one who captured attention. Everyone else seemed overdressed, overloud, and indistinguishable in their glitz and glitter.

On one side of the room, her father, J.T. Sinclair, was holding court. No champagne for him. He lifted his tumbler of scotch in a salute as she joined him.

"So, Jessica, what do you think of my latest little project?"

"Little project?" She snorted. J.T. didn't have a modest bone in his body, and he was fishing for a compliment. "You know it's a huge success. The Carnival theme for the premiere and the after-party was inspired. The reviews won't even matter once the pictures hit the press—they'll be better than the trailers for publicity. Was it your idea?"

"Ah, well, if not, it was my genius to hire whoever *did* think of it."

It took more than genius to pull off a success like this. It took a good measure of power. In a town where you were only as good as your last big hit, Daddy maintained a permanent rung at the top of the ladder.

If J.T. Sinclair had wanted the stars from his new movie, *Masque*, to show up at the premiere wearing sackcloth and ashes, every top designer in the city would have rushed to design sackcloth. Instead, the Carnival costumes were over-the-top glamorous. Jeweled masks and elaborate headpieces topped most of the outfits with gown designs ranging from opulent period knock-offs to risqué modern designs. Some of the men were a bit

more restrained, but almost all sported at least a silk mask in deference to the theme.

She caught a flash of black and her smile faltered as she scanned the group of people a few feet away. J.T. was already turning to someone else in his knot of sycophants and she drifted away from him as she searched the crowd.

Close now. So close. Her heartbeat picked up just a little—an extra rat-a-tat-tat that she tried to ignore. “Jess!”

An outrageously handsome face filled her vision. Blond hair and an impeccable tan blocked out any hint of sober black she might have seen across the room. She was swooped into a dramatic dip ending in an equally dramatic kiss full on the lips.

“Kiss, kiss, darling.” Mason grinned wickedly as he set her back on her feet. Blue eyes glittered through his silk mask.

No boring black for Mason. The white mask with its gold trim matched the rest of his attire right down to the gold lace on his shirt. It should have looked ridiculous, but with his tousled hair and laughing eyes he somehow managed to look dashing instead. Utterly charming and photogenic—it was only part of what made Mason Knight one of the top male stars in Hollywood.

Mason snagged two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter. He drained his in a few gulps as she took a small sip of her own.

“Drink up, luv,” he urged. “We are *celebrating!*” He waved the empty glass to encompass the room. “Another blockbuster hit for J.T., fame and glory for everyone. Why, I am practically guaranteed to double my not inconsiderable fan mail based on this one movie.” He sighed theatrically and continued in a wide-eyed stage whisper. “They send *pictures*, you know. Thousands of pimple-faced teen-age girls go to sleep every night dreaming of me—the only thing to give light to their lonely lives.”

“Be nice, Mason. You know you live for the hero worship.”

“Do I?” He swayed a little, as if considering the prospect. “Ah, Jess, you’re right as always.” He deposited his empty glass on a nearby table. Almost magically, another waiter appeared with more champagne. “Yes, indeed, what are a few white lies to gain the adoration of millions?”

She narrowed her eyes as he lifted the second glass and drained half of it in one gulp. Mason had the metabolism of a hummingbird. Despite his bad-boy reputation, she hadn’t seen him really drunk in years. Tonight, his brilliant blue eyes were feverishly bright and his normally exuberant manner seemed too exaggerated.

Concerned, she wound her arm through his and tugged him toward the French doors at the end of the room.

“Come outside, we could both use some fresh air.”

He leered down at her. “Trying to get me alone, darling? You only have to ask.”

He followed her willingly enough, however. Another cause for concern. Mason generally had to be pried from the center of attention with a crowbar.

She managed to get him across the room and outside without interruption. As she pulled the door shut behind her, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She glanced around to see if anyone had noticed them leaving, but J.T. was taking the stage for a speech and all eyes were on him. She tugged Mason away from the doorway and into the shadows at the edge of the balcony.

“Ready for a snuggle, snookums?”

She slapped his groping hand away and glared up at him.

“That’s enough, Mason. What’s wrong?”

He pouted at her over the rim of his champagne flute.

“You might as well spill it. You only flirt with me like this when you’re upset.” And never in private.

He sighed and the handsome rogue disappeared in the droop of his shoulders as he turned away from her. “They’re all leaving me, Jess.”

She was alarmed to hear his words slurring. “Don’t be so cryptic; what do you mean?”

“Kit’s going to New York. Broadway.” He snorted. “Stupid, gay musical theatre, as if anyone wants to see *that*. Seven performances a week for God knows how long. And Susan, my sweet Susan has been making eyes at some pious frigging doctor she met at a charity event. He hasn’t even got any money to speak of, just a lot of moral mumbo-jumbo about inner city kids. She hasn’t said anything to me yet, but it’s only a matter time

before she's reviewing the out-clause in the prenup." Mason paused for a little hiccup. "And here I'll be, alone with my adoring public. It's really too trite for words."

She slipped her arms around him, smiling into his back as she murmured, "Poor little rich boy, hmm?"

"Not funny," he muttered.

"No, I know. But Mase, if you think Susan has found someone else, have you considered. . . ."

"No," he said vehemently.

"Well, you can't exactly expect Kit to stick around, then, can you?"

"Yes. No. Hell, I don't know." He twisted in her arms so he was facing her. "What am I going to do with myself, Jess?"

"Same as we've always done, live with our choices. If you don't like the ones you've made, make different ones."

He sighed and lowered his forehead to rest against hers.

"I've still got you."

She reached up to stroke his cheek, "Come on, Mr. Wonderful. Let's get you back to the party."

Just then the doors opened, their sheer curtains blowing out so light and noise from inside spilled onto the balcony. A tall figure stood backlit in the doorway, a featureless silhouette. She recognized him instantly. Her fantasy hero had finally caught up with her.

"Knight." His deep voice rolled out into the darkness. "I thought I saw you come out here. Your wife is looking for you."

From behind him, a slender figure pushed her way through the doorway.

"Oh, Jessica, thank goodness he's with you." Susan Knight wafted across the balcony to bestow a gentle kiss on Jessica's cheek. Her eyes sought Jessica's in the darkness.

Jessica patted her shoulder. "You know our boy, just a little post-wrap blues."

Susan smiled uncertainly at Mason. "Did you want to leave early?"

Instantly, the charming rogue was back.

"Jess is being a big mother hen. I have a case of Dom riding on what time Kate climbs on stage and wrestles the mic away from the band. Come along and let's see if we can give her a nudge in the right direction. . . ."

Mason pulled Susan back into the ballroom. J.T. had finished his speech and the band was pounding out a fast-paced dance number.

Jessica turned away. Ignoring the other occupant of the balcony, she leaned against the balustrade and stared into the night. Spread out beneath her were the hotel's pool and gardens. During the day, a restaurant served breakfast and poolside lunch, but at this hour the tables were dark and only the gardens were lit. Tiny lights along the paths and through the trees gave the whole area a fairy-tale whimsy. A few couples strolled in the moonlight, but the summer heat kept most of the guests inside.

"Still quite the trio, aren't you?" Morgan's cool voice interrupted her thoughts. "Doesn't Susan ever get tired of finding you in Knight's arms?"

Jessica let the words drift past her on the warm air. Another time she knew they would hurt—sometime in the future when the odd magic of the night had worn off. For now, they simply floated past her, stray bits of sound, as she concentrated on the timbre of his voice whispering over her senses.

She lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug, not bothering to answer.

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Morgan sighed in frustration. Seeing her again was nothing like he had expected. It was worse and better in more ways than he could count. Tonight had started out as an impulse. Somehow he had never been dropped from J.T.'s guest list and he had been sure she would be here. But he had lied to himself about all his reasons for coming and now his penance was standing right here on the balcony with him, acting like she barely remembered his name.

He drank in her appearance in the moonlight. Long black hair cascaded dramatically down her back. Instead of plain elastic ties for her elaborate mask, strands of sparkling jewels glittered in the glossy tresses. Her blue and black gown dipped low in the back, exposing her pale skin almost to the cleft of her buttocks. She

looked wild and untouchable—a fey princess dropped into the mortal plane. His fists clenched by his side as he remembered Knight’s golden head bent close to hers. He had no use for fantasy, and he knew for a fact that Jessica was eminently touchable.

He moved closer, almost against his will, until he was just behind her—one hand on the balustrade, trapping her between his body and the wide stone rail. They were almost touching. Almost, but still a ghost of air whispered between them. Her perfume enveloped him, pulling him even closer. His head dipped to the hollow of her neck, and he allowed himself to inhale slowly.

It was a mistake. Her scent surrounded him like incense, dark and exotic. The balcony and the hotel disappeared, and a mélange of images assaulted him—his hands on her everywhere, silken skin sliding over his body, Jessica rising over him with the moonlight glowing on her pale skin as he plunged into the heat of her body.

Jessica turned, her breasts brushing his chest as she did. Her voice was low and husky.

“Come dance with me, Morgan.”

She stepped past him and back toward the ballroom, not looking to see if he followed.

Like a fool, he did.

Inside, the party was in full swing. Lights flashed on the dance floor and the music throbbed. Around him, the cream of Hollywood swayed and gyrated—perfect bodies moving in perfect time with the pulse of the music. A blond starlet with an improbably round bosom clutched his arm. Luscious red lips pouted up at him and there was open invitation in the eyes behind the feathers and marabou as she bumped against him. He swept her hand aside as Jessica began to dance.

No one really looks like that when they dance—like the music was made for them, part of them. Sure, in the movies, but it’s all editing and choreography. No one dances like that in real life.

But there was Jessica, right in front of him, yanking him into the fantasy. The other dancers, surreal in their masks and painted faces, melted into a kaleidoscope of color whirling around her.

He moved forward, irresistibly drawn to her. She circled, just out of reach. She moved with wanton abandon, brushing her body against his. He reached again, his fingertips just brushing the soft skin of her arm. . . . And she was gone. She had to be doing it on purpose. Taunting him. Staying just out of reach. Just as he felt his control about to snap, the gods smiled on him and the song ended.

The lights dimmed even lower and the band segued into a slow instrumental.

He caught her slender wrist and yanked her against him. She gasped.

“Payback,” he whispered. She shivered. He wondered if it was fear or anticipation.

She didn’t resist, but closed her eyes as he pulled her into his arms. She twined her arms around his neck and allowed him to press the length of their bodies together. In her heels, her head fit perfectly on his shoulder. He could feel her warm breath against his neck. It was unbearably erotic.

His arms tightened involuntarily around her. He cursed, then surrendered to the inevitable. He shoved one thigh between her legs, cupped her bottom and pulled her against him. Instead of pushing him away, she ran her tongue along the pulse in his neck. Just a little flick, like she was tasting. He pulled her higher onto his thigh and she moaned and wriggled against his erection.

What was he supposed to be accomplishing? He couldn’t remember any more and wasn’t sure he cared.

He buried his face in her hair and breathed in the drugging scent as he held her hips against him. Then she was clenching frantically around him, her hands fisted in his hair. He was just about to go over with her when he realized what was happening and where they were.

He shoved her away.

“That’s enough.” He fought for control; fought to keep what he was feeling off his face. “I won’t be part of one of your public scenes.”

“In this crowd? We’re hardly doing anything they haven’t all seen before. It would barely cause a ripple if you stripped me naked on the hors d’oeuvres table.”

Christ.

“Speak for yourself.” He could barely manage to get the words out. “Exhibitionism isn’t my style.”

Jessica’s gaze wandered down his body, lingered pointedly on his crotch. “Really? It seems to be doing it for you right now.”

She stepped toward him, catching his lapels and pulling herself close to whisper in his ear. “You know

you want me. Right now my panties are dripping . . . tonight, you can have me any way you want.”

He couldn't think, much less respond. At her husky words, every bit of blood drained out of his brain. He had been propositioned plenty of times, but somehow when Jessica did it. . . .

He looked down at her. She smiled, her eyes dark with arousal and promise. His hands tightened around her upper arms as he focused helplessly on her lips.

Jessica swayed toward him.

“Not here.” Then he was cutting through the crowd, practically dragging her along with him.

In the elevator, he fumbled for the room key that would allow them access to the suites on the top floors. His hands felt big and awkward as they swiped the key through the reader. *If you stripped me naked on the hors d'oeuvres table.* . . . Christ. She always had a way of knocking him off balance, of peeling away every last bit of self control. She had thrown the words out so casually, and as soon as she said them he had pictured doing just that—imagined shoving aside the crudités and shrimp cocktail and spreading her out like his own personal feast.

The doors closed and she was in his arms. He pushed her against the elevator wall, his tongue thrusting urgently into her mouth. She wound around him, humming incoherent words of encouragement. They weren't nearly close enough. She tilted her head back, inviting his tongue deeper. He was drowning in the taste of her when he felt her hands slide down between them. His body jerked.

They were still in the elevator. He was damned if he was going to make love in a public elevator. He managed to wrest her hands away from him and anchored them above her head with one of his own.

“*Not here.*” Could she hear the desperation in his voice?

She tilted her head back against the wall. With her arms up over her head, the motion thrust her breasts out. It was impossible not to look down; easier to stop breathing than to keep his eyes above her neck.

Her nipples were clearly visible under the thin silk halter top of her dress. He watched his own hands pushing aside the fabric, heard his own labored breathing as his thumb brushed across the tight peak. He wasn't aware of lowering his head until the sweet taste exploded on his tongue and he heard her moan.

The swish of the elevator doors slapped him back to sanity. He jerked the scrap of material back over her breast and sucked in some deep breaths. Was there a flash of triumph in her eyes? *Jesus.*

The bland normality of the hallway cleared his head. What the hell was he doing? They had barely said two words to each other. Nothing about this night was going according to plan. He had to establish some rules. He had to let her know who was in charge or he was lost.

He looked down at her. What was she thinking? Was it so easy for her? Was it a game, a diversion? He held the door open. Waited. She hesitated, then flashed him a confident smile as she stepped past him.

Inside, he shrugged out of his jacket. “Second thoughts, Jessica?”

Brave words. He wasn't sure if he could really let her go at this point.

She shook her head and raised her chin a little until she looked him right in the eye.

No second chances.

“Leave it.” The words came out like gravel through his throat.

She inclined her head in acknowledgement, then raised her arms and turned in a graceful pirouette.

He forced air into his lungs. He was way out of his league. Stupid to think he could get the upper hand with her. He had expected a thong under the dress, but his imagination had obviously been too conservative. She was wearing what appeared to be a handful of ribbons that attached to a minuscule triangle of material in the front. The ribbons radiated out over her perfect ass into a tiny bow, then drew his eyes to where they disappeared below. In front of him, she pivoted proudly like a pagan goddess in her high heels, ribbons, and the jeweled mask.

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Jessica stood her ground. She had been in front of cameras all her life. She knew that she was beautiful; that she could make him want her. Morgan’s hot gaze and flushed face told her she wasn’t wrong. At least she still had that small bit of power. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t nearly enough, but for tonight it would do. She took a single step toward him and drew his head down to her.

When her knees buckled, she felt his arm circle her waist and he lowered her to the floor. His tongue circled and flicked at her nipple, while his hand reached down to cup her. He tugged at the damp ribbons of her thong, creating an unbearable pressure against her swollen flesh.

She lifted herself against his tormenting hand, trying to ease the ache he was creating. Immediately, he removed both his hand and his mouth.

“Shhh, not yet,” he murmured.

She shifted toward him, reaching for his zipper. As in the elevator, he captured her hands and pulled them above her head.

“Uh, uh. Naughty Jessica, not until *I* say.”

After that, the torture began. Morgan’s hands and mouth were busy, first on her breasts, then lower, pushing her legs wide and stroking her to a fever pitch. He scraped the ribbons of her thong against her most sensitive skin, pushed them aside to plunge his tongue or his fingers into her depths. Each time, just when the bright promise of her orgasm was upon her, he pulled away. Again and again he moved up her body to torment her breasts or kiss her deeply.

“You taste so good, Jessie,” he said in his dark voice. “I’m drunk on you. Taste yourself and see how good it is.”

Finally, she was sobbing in frustration, trembling with desire. Despite his erotic words and the evidence of his erection, he was still fully clothed and in control.

“Please,” she whispered.

He stilled next to her.

“Please, what, Jessie?”

“Please, come inside of me,” she moaned.

He shifted next to her, reaching down to unzip and free himself. Then he was looking down and she was trapped in his gaze. He was poised just at her entrance. She strained her hips toward him, trying to impale herself on him.

“Say my name, Jessie,” he said. “Say my name and tell me what you want.”

“I want you, Morgan. Please,” she begged. “Please, Morgan, I need you inside of me.”

He gave a harsh groan and plunged into her. It was all she needed. She fell into the darkness and the fairy lights exploded around her.

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Jessica came back to herself as Morgan picked her up off the floor and carried her into the next room. He deposited her on the bed, then pulled off his tie and began unbuttoning his shirt.

She struggled for some composure.

“That was nice,” she said. “It must be late, though, I’d better get back downstairs.”

Morgan tossed his shirt aside and began pulling off his pants. Her gaze locked on him in shock. He was

still fully aroused.

“Nice?” He lifted one eyebrow as he shed the rest of his clothes. “Oh, no, Jessie,” he said. “You promised I could have you any way I wanted. I’ve just gotten started.”

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Hours later, Jessica slid cautiously out of the big bed. Her body was sore, but sated in ways she couldn’t have anticipated at the beginning of the night. Quietly, she padded back into the sitting room and slipped into the silk dress. Giving in to impulse, she tiptoed back to the bedroom door for a final look at her dark lover.

Moonlight from the open curtains washed the color from the room. In a tangle of sheets, Morgan’s big body was the only solid thing in a ghostly landscape. Jessica knew lots of handsome men, but somehow none of them ever seemed quite as *real* as Morgan. What would he do if she curled herself against his solid warmth and begged him to let her stay as she had begged him to take her?

She straightened and turned back toward the door. She was sex and scandal. She might be fun for a night, but he would not want her in the morning. She would spare them both that. Carrying her shoes, she let herself out of the suite.

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In the bedroom, Morgan listened to the quiet snick of the door. Her exotic scent lingered in the room. It was a taunting reminder that he was there and she was gone. He could command her body for a night, but she would slip through his fingers in the light of day. Rolling onto his back, he stared sightlessly at the ceiling as his beautiful wife fled back to her glittering life.

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