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We Will Abolish Time

Kristen Ray

I remember the time I first saw Grazia: 10:17 a.m. How could I not notice? She came late, and late meant danger. Venice was a city of canals and bridges and clocks, too, gears and pulleys synchronized to the military minute. Every Monday at precisely ten, my tatting guild met in a drawing room off the Grand Canal to make filigree dresses for the dolls then the rage throughout the Republic—wind-up mini-humans that cried and slept and emitted papier-mâché excrement on schedule.

“Just like Venetian females,” a compatriot complained at 10:16, as usual, then laughed herself silly, as if our regimented lives weren’t cause for despair. She stopped. The pulley squeaking announced an unpunctual arrival. A creature with long hair and dark trousers—trousers?—crawled through the window that served as door when *acqua alta* flooded Venetian streets.

A collective gasp filled the room. Our skirts draped to the ankle.

“*Mi chiamo Grazia*,” she of the trousers announced, choosing the seat nearest mine. “I just moved from Rome,” she said. “My papà builds boats.”

February clouds dimmed the light, hiding my blush. “Susanna.” I tried not to gaze at her soft lips. “My family caretakes the San Marco clock tower, the tallest in Venice.”

“Really?”

I nodded. Her brown eyes melted me. “Father covers days. Ruggiero—my older brother—takes nights.”

“Ruggiero’s a handsome name.”

Tick-tock. “I suppose.” Was she just another girl wanting a timekeeper husband?

“Show me how tatting’s done, Susanna.” Grazia smiled, as if sensing my jealousy. “I’m not good at lace. The female sex in Rome has more freedom”—she winked—“if you know what I mean.”

I was twenty, old enough to be bedded, yet I’d rarely been kissed, and only once by a girl. I pushed away a longing the city fathers forbade. “Move your chair closer,” I said at 10:23, “and I’ll teach you.”

Our hands touched, thrilling me as I instructed Grazia how to move her needle, hoping she never learned. At 10:55, a wind-up woman mounted on the wall twirled and curtsied.

“Time to leave.” I dressed my baby doll in her lace dress.

“Those clocks must drive you mad.”

“Such talk’s not safe.” My heart pounded, whether from a longing for her boldness, or a longing for her, I couldn’t be sure. At 11:01, I said, “Come with me, *cara*. I’ll explain Venice. You can tell me about Rome.”

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Rain fell, but our boots had mechanical flippers that cleared water as we walked. Girls in Venice followed a strict routine that a committee of men designed and enforced. Every square had a clock. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Every girl had a schedule every week, every day, every hour.

“At noon, I take communion.” Grazia and I entered the Chiesa di San Polo. Approaching the altar prompted a door behind the pulpit to open. A clockwork monk emerged, like a cuckoo, and dropped wafers into our open mouths.

“At two, I walk my dog.” I wound a clockwork Bruno. His paws made a clanking sound as they hit cobblestones.

“There are no real dogs?”

“They create waste,” I said. “Bruno doesn’t need food.”

“How convenient.”

At 2:11, we passed a woman prostrate beneath an oversized clock in the Piazza di Santo Stefano. Each time the second hand circled past, the blade attached slashed her back.

“What happened?” Grazia asked, face pale.

“She arrived late, or early, or—”

“Rome’s nothing like this insanity.” Grazia hurried us toward an empty piazza.

“How so?”

“It’s called the Eternal City for a reason.”

“Tell me more.”

We huddled on a stone bench at 2:30. Tick-tock, tick-tock; the clock noise never stopped.

“Who controls time, controls everything,” Grazia began. “Men own their days, thinking, inventing what they want, when they please. The shape of clock towers is no coincidence.”

“What?”

“The tallest buildings, erect, the dial at the top like—”

I put my finger to my lips. “How did you change things?”

“We started small,” she whispered. “Disrupted gears and pulleys, even a few minutes, to prove Father Time’s not absolute. Eventually, women occupied the clock towers, refusing to leave until they shared time power.”

“San Marco’s the master clock that all others here follow. But conquering that tower’s impossible.”

Her face drew near mine at 2:43. “Does Ruggiero have an extra key?”

My brother again. I imagined smashing clocks, controlling my life.

“Yes. But I’m not brave.”

“Tomorrow’s *Carnevale*, easier for us to hide. We will abolish time.”

Grazia brought my hand to her lips. “Or at least taste its sweetness.”

I never knew aching could feel so good. “I’ll steal the key.”

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The following night, while Venice danced, we donned velvet masks with feathers that moved up and down, like birds flying free. I unlocked the tower door at 11:49, when Ruggiero often patrolled the highest terrace overlooking the city. We climbed stairs, creeping past giant moving clock parts, thick air stinking of oil. The gears and pulleys were deafening. I wore a pair of Grazia’s trousers.

“Baby doll,” she mouthed.

I passed her the miniature girl whose dress I’d tatted that morning.

“You do it.” Grazia tossed her back.

Pulse racing, I flung the creature into the gears.

Footsteps pounded, coming closer. “Hey,” Ruggiero shouted. “Who’s there?”

Grazia grabbed my arm. “*Andiamo.*”

The doll jammed the cogs. A screech like a baby dying, then the clock stopped, triggering a clanging so loud it hurt. We shoved Ruggiero aside and raced down, ears covered, emerging outside, fleeing crowds of costumed party-goers, racing along narrow streets, crossing arched bridges. Breathless, we found Grazia’s boat on a faraway canal. Before night ended, we’d sail the open sea.

How much braver could I be? “Grazia,” I said, “I’ve never felt like this.”

“Free from time?”

“Free to ask if I can kiss you.”

We tore off our masks, and she pulled me toward her. Bells across Venice rang in a crazy, random rhyme. I didn’t know the hour. I didn’t care. Kissing, we abolished time. Kissing, we found the infinite.