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## **Vintage** *Cherish*

# **The Venetian Playboy's Bride**

LUCY GORDON

# **Lucy Gordon**

## **The Venetian Playboy's Bride**

### **Аннотация**

Venice: a city of secrets and passion!Dulcie Maddox is in Venice to work—but she finds herself wanting to spend every day with a tall, handsome gondolier....Guido Calvani is no gondolier—he's actually one of the wealthiest aristocrats in Venice. He hasn't told Dulcie that, though; it's refreshing to be wanted for himself, rather than for his money. Only, now he's falling for Dulcie. He'd like to make her his bride—but she has no idea who he really is, not even his real name. Then Guido discovers he's not the only one hiding a secret. And Dulcie's secret turns his world upside down....

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LUCY GORDON

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doesn't want it....

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and investments in Rome....

Leo—proud, rugged and athletic, Leo is a reluctant tycoon,  
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will find a wife—but will it be out of love or duty...?

Find out in this emotional, exciting and dramatic trilogy:

The Venetian Playboy's Bride #3744

The Italian Millionaire's Marriage #3751

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Don't miss it!

Dear Reader,

I always love the chance to write about Venice, because that city has been my second home since I married a Venetian. Perhaps that's why I think Venetians are the most romantic of men (although all other Italians come a close second). They combine emotional intensity with lightheartedness in a way that makes them irresistible.

Guido Calvani, the hero of *The Venetian Playboy's Bride*, is like that. He approaches life with a laugh and a conviction that he can make things happen the way he wants. But then, he's never met anyone like Dulcie, a private detective who's one step ahead, and it's only when it's too late that he discovers she's tied him in knots.

Their story is played out against Venice with its dark corners and mysterious alleys. In the city on the water nothing is ever quite what it seems, including Guido and Dulcie, who start by hiding their true selves, then learn, through love, to cast their masks aside.

After Guido comes Marco from Rome, cool and self-

sufficient. Then Leo, the countryman from Tuscany. And always in the background is their uncle Francesco, Count Calvani, whose colorful life hides a romantic secret that takes them all by surprise.

Lucy Gordon

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# CHAPTER ONE

GUIDO CALVANI took another turn along the hospital corridor, trying not to think of his uncle, lying behind the closed door, desperately ill.

He was high up on the top floor. At one end of the corridor the window looked out over the heart of Venice, red roofs, canals, little bridges. At the other end was the Grand Canal. Guido stopped and regarded the flashing water, snaking its way through the heart of the little city to where it would reach the Palazzo Calvani, home of the Calvani counts for centuries. By tonight he might have inherited the title, and the thought appalled him.

His mercurial spirits weren't often depressed. He approached life with an optimism that was reflected in his appearance. His blue eyes might have been born gleaming, and a smile seemed to be his natural expression. At thirty-two, rich, handsome, free, he had no cares, save for the one that now threatened him.

Guido was a man of warm affections. He loved his uncle. But he also loved his freedom, and within a few hours he might have lost them both.

He turned swiftly as two young men appeared from the staircase below.

'Thank heavens!' he said, embracing his half-brother Leo, who clasped him back unselfconsciously. With his cousin Marco he merely clapped him on the shoulder. There was a proud

reserve about Marco that even the open-hearted Guido had to respect.

‘How bad is Uncle Francesco?’ Marco demanded tersely.

‘Very bad, I think. I called you last night because he’d started to have pains in his chest, but he wouldn’t be sensible and see a doctor. Then early this morning he collapsed in agony, and I sent for an ambulance. We’ve been here ever since. They’re still doing tests.’

‘It surely can’t be a heart attack,’ Leo said. ‘He’s never had one before, and the life he’s led—’

‘Was enough to give any normal man a dozen heart attacks,’ Marco supplied. ‘Women, wine, fast cars—’

‘Women!’ Guido echoed.

‘Three speedboats smashed up,’ Leo recalled.

‘Gambling!’

‘Women!’

‘Skiing!’

‘Mountaineering!’

‘Women!’ They spoke with one voice.

A footstep on the stairs reduced them all to silence as Lizabetta, the count’s housekeeper, appeared among them like doom. She was thin, sharp-faced, elderly, and they greeted her with more respect than they ever showed their uncle. This grim creature was the power in the Palazzo Calvani.

She acknowledged them with a nod that managed to combine respect for their aristocratic status with contempt for the male

sex, sat down and took out her knitting.

‘I’m afraid there’s no news yet,’ Guido told her gently.

He looked up as the ward door opened and the doctor emerged. He was an elderly man and had been the count’s friend for years. His grave expression could mean only one thing, and their hearts sank.

The doctor pronounced. ‘Get the silly old fool out of here and stop wasting my time.’

‘But—his heart attack—?’ Guido protested.

‘Heart attack, my foot! Indigestion! Liza, you shouldn’t let him eat prawns in butter.’

Liza glared. ‘Much notice he takes of me,’ she snapped.

‘Can we see him now?’ Guido asked.

A roar from within answered him. In his prime Count Francesco had been known as The Lion of Venice, and now that he was in his seventies nothing much had changed.

The three young men entered their uncle’s room and stood regarding him wryly. He was sitting up in bed, his face framed by his white hair, his blue eyes gleaming.

‘Gave you a fright, didn’t I?’ he bawled.

‘Enough of a fright to bring me all the way from Rome and Leo from Tuscany,’ Marco remarked. ‘All because you’ve been stuffing yourself.’

‘Don’t talk to the head of the family like that,’ Francesco growled. ‘And blame Liza. Her cooking is irresistible.’

‘So you have to gobble it like a greedy schoolboy,’ Marco

observed, not noticeably intimidated by addressing the head of the family. 'Uncle, when are you going to act your age?'

'I didn't get to be seventy-two by acting my age!' Francesco remarked with perfect truth. He pointed at Marco. 'When you're seventy-two you'll be a dried-up stick without a heart.'

Marco shrugged.

The old man indicated Leo. 'When you're seventy-two you'll be more of a country bumpkin than you are already.'

'That's cool,' Leo observed, unruffled.

'What will I be at seventy-two?' Guido asked.

'You won't. An outraged husband will have shot you long before then.'

Guido grinned. 'You should know all about outraged husbands, uncle. I heard that only last—'

'Clear off all of you. Liza will bring me home.'

As soon as they'd escaped the building they leaned against the honey-coloured stone wall and breathed out long sighs of relief.

'I need a drink,' Guido said, making a beeline for a small bar beside the water. The others followed him and seated themselves at a table in the sun.

Since Guido lived in Venice, Leo in Tuscany and Marco in Rome they saw each other only rarely, and the next few minutes were occupied by taking stock. Leo was the least altered. As his uncle had said, he was a countryman, lean, hard-bodied, with a candid face and clear eyes. He wasn't a subtle man. Life reached him directly, through his senses, and he read books only when

necessary.

Marco was the same as always, but more so: a little more tense, a little more focused, a little more heedless of ordinary mortals. He existed in a rarefied world of high finance, and it seemed to his cousins that he was happiest there. He lived expensively, buying only the best, which he could well afford. But he did so, less because it gave him pleasure than because it would never have occurred to him to do otherwise.

Guido's mercurial nature had been born for a double life. Officially he resided at the palazzo, but he also had a discreet bachelor flat where he could come and go, free of critical eyes. He too had intensified, becoming more charming, and more elusive in his determination to remain his own man. He possessed a mulish stubbornness which he hid behind laughter and a sweet temper. His dark hair was a shade too long, curving over his collar with a slight shagginess that made him look younger than his thirty-two years.

Nobody spoke until they were on their second beer.

'I can't stand this,' Guido said at last. 'Being brought to the brink and then let off is going to finish me. And let off for how long?'

'What are you raving about?' Marco demanded.

'Ignore him,' Leo grinned. 'A man who's just been reprieved is bound to be light-headed.'

'That's right, mock me!' Guido said. 'By rights it should be you in this mess.'

Leo was his elder brother, but by a trick of fate it was Guido who was the heir. Bertrando, their father, had married a widow whose 'late' husband had subsequently turned up alive. By then she had already died giving birth to Leo, leaving him illegitimate. Two years later Bertrando had married again, and his second wife had presented him with Guido.

Nobody had worried about it then. It was a technicality that would cease to matter when Count Francesco married and had a son. But as the years passed with no sign of his marriage the anomaly began to glare. Although the younger son, Guido was legally the only son, and heir to the title.

He hated the prospect. It was a trap waiting to imprison his free spirit. He longed for a miracle to restore Leo's rights, but Leo didn't want them either. Only the earth interested him: growing wine, wheat and olives, breeding cattle and horses. He cared for the title no more than Guido.

The only discord between them had come when Guido tried to tempt his brother into legal action to legitimatise himself and stop 'shirking his duty'. Leo had bluntly replied that if Guido thought he was going to tie himself down to a load of pointless flapdoodle he was even more cretino than he looked. Guido had responded with equal robustness and it had taken Marco to stop an undignified brawl. As the son of Silvio, younger brother to Francesco and Bertrando, he had little chance of the title, and could afford to regard the shenanigans of the other two with lofty amusement.

‘Of course it’s bound to happen one day,’ he mused now, maliciously. ‘Count Guido, father of ten, a man of distinction, fat, sedate, middle-aged, with a wife to match.’

‘That shirt looks like it’s worth a thousand dollars,’ Guido mused, fingering his half-full glass significantly.

‘Only a joke,’ Marco placated him.

‘Not funny.’ Guido took another swallow and sighed mournfully. ‘Not funny at all.’

Roscoe Harrison’s London home was no palace, but it had had as much money lavished on it as the Calvani abode. The difference was that he was a man without taste. He believed in display, and the crude power of cash, and it showed.

‘I buy only the best,’ he was saying now to the fair-haired young woman sitting in his office at the back of the house. ‘That’s why I’m buying you.’

‘You aren’t buying me, Mr Harrison,’ Dulcie said coolly. ‘You’re hiring my skill as a private detective. There’s a big difference.’

‘Well your skill will do me just fine. Take a look at this.’

He thrust a photograph across the desk. It showed Roscoe’s daughter, Jenny Harrison, her dark hair streaming over her shoulders in the Venetian sunlight, listening ardently to a young gondolier playing a mandolin, while another gondolier, with curly hair and a baby face, looked on.

‘That’s the character who thinks he’s going to marry Jenny for her fortune,’ Roscoe snapped, jabbing at the mandolin player

with his finger. ‘He’s told her he isn’t really a gondolier, but heir to a count—Calvani, or some such name—but I say it’s a big, fat lie.

‘I’m not an unreasonable man. If he really were a posh nob that would be different. His title, my money. Fair enough. But a posh nob rowing a gondola? I don’t think so. I want you to go to Venice, find out what’s going on. Then, when you’ve proved he’s no aristocrat—’

‘Perhaps he is,’ Dulcie murmured.

Roscoe snorted. ‘Your job is to prove he isn’t.’

Dulcie winced. ‘I can’t prove he isn’t if he is,’ she pointed out.

‘Well, you’ll be able to tell, ’cos you’re top drawer yourself.

You’re Lady Dulcie Maddox, aren’t you?’

‘In my private life, yes. But when I’m working I’m simply, Dulcie Maddox, PI.’

She guessed that Roscoe didn’t like that. He was impressed by her titled connections, and when she brushed them aside he felt cheated.

Last night he’d invited her to dinner in order to meet his daughter, Jenny. Dulcie had been charmed by the young girl’s freshness and naïvety. It was easy to believe that she needed protection from a fortune hunter.

‘I want you because you’re the best,’ Roscoe returned to his theme. ‘You’re posh. You act posh. You look posh—not your clothes because they’re—’

‘Cheap,’ she supplied. The jeans and denim jacket had been



the cheapest thing on the market stall. Luckily she had the kind of tall, slender figure that brought out the best in anything, and her mane of fair hair and strange green eyes drew admiration wherever she went.

‘Inexpensive,’ Roscoe said in one of his rare ventures into tact. ‘But you look posh, in yourself. You can tell aristocrats because they’re so tall and slim. Probably comes from eating proper food while the peasants had to make do with stodge.’

‘Maybe with the others,’ Dulcie said. ‘But with me it came from not having enough to eat because all the family money was blown on the horses. That’s why I’m working as a private investigator. I’m as poor as a church mouse.’

‘Then you’ll need a load of new gear to be convincing. I keep an account at Feltham’s for Jenny. I’ll call and tell them to do you proud at my expense. When you reach the Hotel Vittorio you’ve got to look the part.’

‘The Vittorio?’ She looked quickly out of the window, lest he guess that this particular hotel had a special meaning for her. It was only a few weeks ago that she had been planning her honeymoon in that very hotel, with a man who’d sworn eternal love.

But that was then. This was now. Love had vanished with brutal suddenness. She would have given anything to avoid the Vittorio, but there was no help for it.

‘Most expensive hotel in Venice,’ Roscoe said. ‘So buy the clothes, then get out there fast. Fly first class. No cheap economy

flights in case he checks up on you.'

'You mean he might employ a private detective too?'

'No knowing. Some people are devious enough for anything.'

Dulcie maintained a diplomatic silence.

'Here's a cheque for expenses. It's not enough to look rich.

You've got to splash it around a bit.'

'Splash it around a bit,' Dulcie recited, glassy eyed at the size of the cheque.

'Find this gondolier, make him think you're rolling in money, so he'll make up to you. When you've got him hooked let me know. I'll send Jenny out there, and she'll see the kind of man he really is. She won't believe it, but the world is full of jerks on the look out for a rich girl.'

'Yes,' Dulcie murmured with feeling. 'It is.'

On the night of Count Francesco's return, supper at the palazzo was formal. The four men sat around an ornate table while a maid served dish after dish, under the eagle eyes of Liza. To the count this was normal, and Marco was comfortable with it. But the other two found it suffocating, and they were glad when the meal was over.

As they prepared for escape the count signalled for Guido to join him in his ornate study.

'We'll be at Luigi's Bar,' Marco called back from the front door.

'Couldn't this wait?' Guido pleaded, following his uncle into the study.

‘No, it can’t wait,’ Francesco growled. ‘There are things to be said. I won’t bother to ask if the stories I’ve heard about you are true.’

‘They probably are,’ Guido agreed with a grin.

‘It’s time it stopped. After all the trouble I’ve taken, making sure you met every woman in society.’

‘I’m nervous with society women. They’re all after just one thing!’

‘What!’

‘My future title. Half of them never look at me properly. Their gaze is fixed on the Calvani honours.’

‘If you mean that they’re prepared to overlook your disgraceful way of life out of respect for your dignity—’

‘Dignity be blowed. Besides, maybe I don’t want a woman who’ll overlook my “disgraceful” life. It might be more fun if she was ready to join in.’

‘Marriage is not supposed to be fun!’ Francesco thundered.

‘I was afraid of that.’

‘It’s time you started acting like a man of distinction instead of spending your time with the Lucci family, fooling about in gondolas—’

‘I like rowing a gondola.’

‘The Luccis are fine hard-working people but their lives take one path and yours another—’

In a flash Guido’s face lost its good humour and hardened. ‘The Luccis are my friends, and you’ll oblige me by remembering

that.'

'You can be friends—but you can't live Fede's life. You've got to make your own way. Perhaps I shouldn't have allowed you to see so much of them.'

'You didn't allow me,' Guido said quietly. 'I didn't ask your permission. Nor would I. Ever. Uncle, I have the greatest respect for you, but I won't allow you to run my life.'

When Guido spoke in that tone the merry charmer vanished, and there was something in his eyes that made even the count wary. He saw it now and fell silent. Guido was instantly contrite.

'There's no harm in it,' he said gently. 'I just like to row. It keeps me fit after my other "excesses".'

'If it were just rowing,' Francesco snorted, recovering lost ground. 'But I've heard you even sing "O sole mio" for tourists.'

'They expect it. Especially the British. It's something to do with ice cream cornets.'

'And you pose with them for photographs.' The count took out a snapshot showing Guido in gondoliering costume, serenading a pretty, dark-haired girl, while another gondolier, with curly hair and a baby face, sat just behind them.

'My nephew,' he growled, 'the future Count Calvani, poses in a straw hat.'

'It's disgraceful,' Guido agreed. 'I'm a blot on the family name. You'll just have to marry quickly, have a son, and cut me out. Rumour says you're still as vigorous as ever, so it shouldn't be—'

'Get out of here if you know what's good for you!'

Guido fled with relief, leaving the building and slipping away down tiny, darkened streets. As he reached the Grand Canal he saw a collection of seven gondolas, moving side by side. It was a 'serenade', a show put on to please the tourists. In the central boat the baby-faced young man from the photograph stood singing in a sweet tenor that drifted across the water. As the song came to an end there was applause, and the boats drifted in to their moorings.

Guido waited until his friend, Federico Lucci, had assisted his last passenger to disembark before hailing him.

'Hey there, Fede! If the English signorina could hear you sing like that she would follow you to the ends of the earth,' he said. 'What's the matter?' for Fede had groaned. 'Doesn't she love you any more?'

'Jenny loves me,' Fede declared. 'But her Poppa will kill me before he lets us marry. He thinks I'm only after her money, but it isn't true. I love her. That time you met, didn't you think she was wonderful?'

'Wonderful,' Guido said, diplomatically concealing his opinion that Jenny was a pretty doll who lacked spice in her character. His own taste was for a woman who could offer a challenge, lead him a merry dance and give as good as she got. But he was too kind a friend to say so.

'You know I'll help in any way I can,' he said warmly.

'You've already helped us so much,' Fede said, 'letting us meet in your apartment, covering for me on the gondola—'

‘That’s nothing. I enjoy it. Let me know when you want me to do it again.’

‘My Jenny has returned to England. She says she will reason with her Poppa, but I’m afraid she may never return.’

‘If it’s true love, she’ll come back,’ Guido insisted.

Fede gave a shout of laughter and thumped him on the shoulder. ‘What do you know about true love? With you it’s here-today-and-gone-tomorrow. If they mention marriage you dive for cover.’

‘Sssh!’ Guido looked hunted. ‘My uncle has ears everywhere. Now come on, let’s join Leo and Marco at Luigi’s, and we can all get drunk in peace.’

Two days later Dulcie flew to Venice, landing at Marco Polo Airport and waiting, with an air of aloof grandeur, while her luggage was loaded onto the Vittorio’s private motor launch.

It was early June, and as the boatman started the trip across the lagoon the sun was high in the sky and the light glinted on the water. Surrounded by so much bright beauty Dulcie briefly forgot her sadness.

To her right she could see the causeway linking Venice to the mainland. A train was making its way across. On the other side the lagoon stretched far away to the horizon.

‘There, signorina,’ the boatman said, speaking with the pride all Venetians feel in their city.

What she saw at first were shining orbs, gradually resolving themselves into golden cupolas, gleaming in the sun. The city

itself, delicate and perfect, came gradually into view, taking her breath away with its beauty. She stayed motionless, not wanting to miss anything, as the motor boat slowed down.

‘We have to enter Venice gently,’ the driver explained, ‘so that we do not cause any large waves. This is the Cannaregio Canal, which will take us to the Grand Canal, and the Vittorio.’

Suddenly the brightness of the lagoon was blotted out and they were drifting in shadow between high buildings. Dulcie resumed her seat and leaned back, looking up to the narrow strip of sky overhead. After a few minutes they were in sunlight again, heading down the Grand Canal to a magnificent seventeenth-century palace. The Hotel Vittorio.

At the landing-stage hands reached down to help her up the steps and guide her into the hotel. She made a stately entrance, followed by porters bearing her luggage in procession.

‘The Empress Suite,’ declared a lofty individual on the desk.

‘The Emp—?’ she echoed, dismayed. ‘Are you sure there hasn’t been a mistake?’

But she was already being swept away to the third floor where gilded double doors opened before her and she walked into the palatial apartment. Everything about it was designed to look like the abode of an empress, including the eighteenth-century furniture. On one wall hung a portrait of the beautiful, young Empress Elisabeth of Austria, painted in the nineteenth century when Venice had been an Austrian province.

To one side was another pair of double doors, through which

Dulcie found her bedroom, with a bed large enough to sleep four. She gasped, overwhelmed by such opulence. A maid appeared, ready to unpack her luggage. Just in time she remembered Roscoe's orders to 'splash it about a bit' and distributed tips large enough to get herself talked about even in this place.

When everyone had gone she sat in silence, trying to come to terms with the shock of being here, alone, when she should have been here as a blissful bride.

She forced herself to confront the memory of Simon, painful though it was. He'd assumed that Lady Dulcie Maddox, daughter of Lord Maddox, must have a potful of family money hidden somewhere. He'd courted her ardently, using practised words to sweep her away in a magic balloon, to a place where everything was love and gratification.

But the balloon had fallen to earth, with her in it.

Simon had lived lavishly—all on credit, as she'd later discovered. She hadn't cared about his money, only about his love. But the one was as illusory as the other.

He'd shown her the Hotel Vittorio's brochure one evening when they were dining at the Ritz. 'I've already made our honeymoon booking,' he'd said, 'in the Empress Suite.'

'But darling, the cost—'

'So what? Money is for spending.'

She'd spoken with passionate tenderness. 'You don't have to spend a lot on me. Money isn't what it's about.'

His quizzical frown should have warned her. 'No, sweetie, but



it helps.’

Then she’d said—and the memory tormented her still— ‘You don’t think I’m marrying you for your money do you? I love you, you. I wouldn’t care if you were as poor as I am.’

She could still see the wary look that came into his eyes, and sense the chill that settled over him. ‘This is a wind up, right? As poor as Lady Dulcie Maddox.’

‘You can’t eat a title. I haven’t a penny.’

‘I heard your grandfather blew twenty grand at the races in one day.’

‘That’s right. And my father was the same. That’s why I haven’t a penny.’

‘But you lot have all got trust funds, everyone knows that.’

The truth had got through to her now, but she fought not to face it. ‘Do I live like someone with a trust fund?’

‘Go on, you’re just slumming.’

She’d finally convinced him that she wasn’t, and that was the last time she saw him. Her final memory was of him snatching a credit card statement from his pocket and tossing it at her with the bitter words, ‘Do you know how much money I’ve spent on you? And for what? Well, no more.’

Then he stormed out of the Ritz, leaving her to pay for the meal.

And that had been that.

Sitting in the quiet of the Empress Suite Dulcie knew that it was time to pull herself together. Now there was another fortune

hunter, but this time he was the prey and she the pursuer, seeking him out for retribution, the avenger of all women.

She showered in a gold and marble bathroom and chose something to wear for her first outing 'on duty'. She finally left the hotel arrayed in an orange silk dress, with a delicate pendant of pure gold. Gold earrings and dainty gilt sandals completed the ensemble. So much gold might be overdoing it, but she needed to make an impression, fast.

When she'd finished she took a final look at the picture, to make sure his face was imprinted on her mind. She dismissed the baby-faced boy at the back. There was the one she wanted, playing the mandolin, over-flowing with confidence, smiling at Jenny, no doubt serenading her with honeyed words. The rat!

Finding one gondolier among so many was a problem, but she'd come prepared. Guidebooks had told her about the vaporetto, the great water buses that transported passengers along the Grand Canal, so she headed for one of the landing stages, boarded the next boat, and took up a position in the front, armed with powerful binoculars.

For an hour the vaporetto moved along the canal, criss-crossing to landing stages on each side, while Dulcie searched for her quarry, without success. At the end of the line she turned back and started again. No luck this time either, and she was almost about to give up when suddenly she saw him.

It was only a glimpse, too brief to be sure, but there was the gondola gliding between two buildings while she frantically

focused the binoculars, catching him clearly only at the last moment.

The vaporetto was about to cast off from a landing stage. Dulcie moved fast, jumping ashore just in time and looking desperately about her. The gondola had vanished. She plunged down an alley between tall buildings to a small canal at the far end. No sign of him there, but he must be somewhere to her left. She made for a tiny bridge, tore over it and into another dark alley.

At the far end was another small canal, another bridge. A gondola was heading towards her. But was it the same one? The gondolier's face was hidden by a straw hat. She placed herself on the bridge, watching intently as the long boat neared, the oarsman standing at the far end.

'Lift your head,' she agonised. 'Look up!'

He had almost reached the bridge. In a moment it would be too late. Driven by desperation she wrenched off one of her shoes and tossed it over the side. It struck his hat, knocking it off, before landing exactly at his feet.

Then he looked up, and there was the face she'd come to Venice seeking, the face of the mandolin player. Eyes of fierce, startling blue, set in a laughing face, seemed to seize her, hold her, almost hypnotise her, so that she found herself smiling back.

'Buon giorno, bella signorina,' said Guido Calvani.

## CHAPTER TWO

NO SOONER were the words out of his mouth than he'd vanished under the bridge. Dulcie dashed to the other side as he emerged and began to negotiate his way to the shore. She took a quick look at the picture to make sure she had the right man. Yes, there he was, smiling at Jenny, playing the mandolin.

Thank goodness he didn't have a passenger, she thought as she hobbled off the bridge and along to where he'd pulled in.

'I'm so sorry,' she called. 'I just turned my foot and the shoe slid off and went right over the side of the bridge before I could grab it. And then it hit you on the head. I'll never forgive myself if you're hurt.'

He grinned, holding up the dainty gilt sandal with its absurdly high heel.

'But I am hurt, very badly. Not in my head but—' he bowed gallantly with his hand over his heart.

This was what she'd expected. Practised charm. Right! She was ready for him.

He'd pulled in by a short flight of steps that ran down into the water.

'If you will sit down, I'll return this to you in the proper fashion,' he said.

She sat on the top step and felt her ankle grasped in strong, warm fingers as he slid the shoe back onto her foot, adjusting it

precisely.

‘Thank you—Federico.’

He gave a little start. ‘Fed—?’

‘It’s written there.’ Dulcie pointed to a label stitched near his collar, bearing the name Federico.

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ Guido said hurriedly. He’d forgotten Fede’s mother’s habit of sewing nametapes on the gondolier shirts of her husband, two brothers and three sons. No matter. He would simply tell her his real name. But he became distracted by the feel of her dainty ankle in his palm, and when he looked up he found her watching him with a quizzical look that drove everything else out of his mind. What did names matter?

‘And you are new to Venice?’ he asked.

‘I arrived only today.’

‘Then you must accept my apologies for your rough introduction to my city. But let me say also that the stones of Venice will not be kind to those shoes.’

‘It wasn’t very bright of me to wear such high heels, was it?’ she asked, looking shamefaced. ‘But I didn’t know, you see. Venice is so different to anywhere else in the world, and there’s nobody to tell me anything.’ She managed to sound a little forlorn.

‘That’s terrible,’ he said sympathetically. ‘For a beautiful young lady to be alone is always a shame, but to be alone in Venice is a crime against nature.’

He said it so delightfully, she thought. Lucky for her she was armed in advance.

‘I’d better go back to my hotel and change into sensible shoes before I have another accident.’ She became aware that his fingers were still clasped about her ankle. ‘Would you mind?’

‘Forgive me.’ He snatched back his hand. ‘May I take you to your hotel?’

‘But I thought gondoliers didn’t do that. Surely you only do round trips?’

‘It’s true that we don’t act like taxis. But in your case I would like to make an exception. Please—’ He was holding out his hand. She placed her own hand in it and rose to her feet, then let him help her down the steps to the water.

‘Steady,’ he said, helping her into the well of the gondola, which rocked, forcing her to clutch him for safety.

‘You sit here,’ he said, settling into the rear-facing seats, an arrangement that would enable him to see her face. ‘It’s better if you don’t face the front,’ he hurriedly improvised. ‘At this hour people get the setting sun in their eyes. And you might get seasick,’ he added for good measure.

‘I’ll do just as you say,’ she agreed demurely. She supposed she could be blinded by the setting sun from either direction, depending on which route he took, but she appreciated his strategy.

It suited her, too, to be able to lean back and stretch out her long, silk-clad legs before his gaze. True, she was supposed to be tempting him with the prospect of money, but there was no harm in using the weapons nature had bestowed.

He cast off, and for a while they went gently through narrow canals, where buildings rose sheer out of the water. They glided under a bridge and as it slid away she saw that it seemed to emerge direct from one building, over the water and straight into another. Dulcie watched in wonder, beginning to understand how this city was truly different from all others.

He was a clever man, she thought. He knew better than to spoil it by talking. Only the soft splash of his oar broke the silence, and gradually a languor came over her. Already Venice was casting its spell, bidding her forget everything but itself, and give herself up to floating through beauty.

‘It’s another world,’ she murmured. ‘Like something that fell to earth from a different planet.’

An arrested look came into his eyes. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘That’s exactly it.’

They seemed to drift for ages, one beauty crowding on the last, too many impressions for her to sort them out. Vaguely she remembered that this wasn’t why she was here. Her job was to work on the man standing there, guiding twenty-two feet of heavy, curved wood as though it was the easiest thing in the world.

She considered him, and found that she understood why a naïve, sheltered girl like Jenny found him irresistible. He was tall, not heavily built but with a wiry strength that she’d already felt when he’d helped her into the boat. Just a light gesture, but the steel had been there, unmistakable, exciting. He handled the

heavy oar as though it weighed nothing, moving with it, lithe and graceful, as though they were dancing partners.

They passed into a wider canal, and suddenly the sun was on him. Dulcie looked up, shading her eyes against the glare, and at once he removed his straw boater and tossed it to her.

‘You wear it,’ he called. ‘The sun is hot.’

She rammed it onto her head and leaned back, taking pleasure in the way the light illuminated his throat and the strong column of his neck, and touched off a hint of red in his hair. How intensely blue his eyes were, she thought, and how naturally they crinkled at the corners when he smiled. And he smiled easily. He was doing so now, his head on one side as though inviting her to share a joke, so that she couldn’t help joining in with his laughter.

‘Are we nearly there?’ she asked.

‘There?’ he asked with beguiling innocence. ‘Where?’

‘At my hotel.’

‘But you didn’t tell me which hotel.’

‘And you didn’t ask me. So how do we know we’re going in the right direction?’

His shrug was a masterpiece, asking if it really mattered. And it didn’t.

Dulcie pulled herself together. She was supposed to toss the hotel name at him, advertising her ‘wealth’. Instead she’d revelled in the magic of his company for—good heavens, an hour?

‘The Hotel Vittorio,’ she said firmly.

He didn’t react, but of course, he wouldn’t, she reasoned. A



practised seducer would know better than to seem impressed.

‘It’s an excellent hotel, signorina,’ he said. ‘I hope you are enjoying it.’

‘Well, the Empress Suite is a little overwhelming,’ she said casually, just to drive the point home.

‘And very sad, for a lady alone,’ he pointed out. ‘But perhaps you have friends who’ll soon move into the second bedroom.’

‘You know the Empress Suite?’

‘I’ve seen the inside,’ Guido said vaguely. It was true. His friends from America regularly stayed there, and he’d downed many a convivial glass in those luxurious surroundings.

I’ll bet you’ve seen the inside, Dulcie thought, getting her cynicism back safely into place.

‘When your friends arrive you’ll feel better,’ he said.

‘There are no friends. I’m spending this vacation on my own.’ They were pulling in to the Vittorio’s landing stage, and he reached out to help her onto land. ‘How much do I owe you?’ she asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘But of course I must pay you. I’ve had an hour of your time.’

‘Nothing,’ he repeated, and she felt his hand tighten on her wrist. ‘Please don’t insult me with money.’ His eyes were very blue, holding hers, commanding her to do what he wished.

‘I didn’t mean to insult you,’ she said slowly. ‘It’s just that—’

‘It’s just that money pays for everything,’ he finished. ‘But only if it is for sale.’ He spoke with sudden intensity. ‘Don’t be alone

in Venice. That's bad.'

'I don't have a choice.'

'But you do. Let me show you my city.'

'Your city?'

'Mine because I love it and know its ways as no stranger can.'

I would like you to love it too.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to make one of the flirtatious replies she'd been practising for just this moment, but the words wouldn't come. She had a sense of being at the point of no return. To go on was risky and there would be no way back. But to withdraw was to spend a lifetime wondering 'what if?'

'I don't think—' she said slowly. 'I don't think I should.'

'I think you should,' he said urgently.

'But—'

His hand tightened on hers. 'You must. Don't you know that you must?'

The glow of his eyes was almost fierce in its intensity. She drew a sharp breath. She didn't come from a long line of gamblers for nothing.

'Yes,' she said. 'I must.'

'I'll meet you at seven o'clock at Antonio's. It's just around the corner. And wear walking shoes.'

She watched as he glided away, then hurried up to her suite, glad of the time alone to gather her thoughts.

It wasn't easy. In a few blazing moments he'd taken her ideas and tossed them into the air, so that they'd fallen about her in

disorder. It took some stern concentration to reclaim her mind from his influence, but at last she felt she'd managed it.

Stage one completed successfully. Quarry identified, contact made. Ground laid for stage two. Professional detachment. Never forget that.

Guido got away from the hotel as fast as he could before he was spotted by someone who knew his true identity. In a few minutes he'd left the city centre behind and was heading for the little back 'streets' in the northern part of town, where the gondolier families lived, and their boatyards flourished.

At the Lucci house he found Federico at home watching a football match on television. Without a word he took a beer from the fridge and joined him, neither speaking until half time. Then, as he always did, Guido put the money he'd earned on the table, nearly doubling it with extra from his own pocket.

'I had a good day, didn't I?' Fede said appreciatively, pocketing the money with a yawn.

'Excellent. You're an example to us all.'

'At this rate I think I've earned a holiday.'

'I know I have.' Guido rubbed his arms, which were aching.

'Perhaps it's time you got back to the souvenir trade.'

Guido had established his independence of the Calvani family by setting up his own business, catering to tourists. He owned two factories on the outlying island of Murano, one of which made glass, and the other trinkets and souvenirs.

'I suppose it is,' he said now, unenthusiastically. 'It's just that

—Fede, have you ever found yourself doing something you never meant to do—just a word, a choice to be made in a split second? And suddenly your whole life has changed?”

‘Sure. When I met my Jenny.’

‘And you don’t know how it’s all going to end, but you do know that you have to go on and find out?’

Fede nodded. ‘That’s just how it is.’

‘So what do I do?’

‘My friend, you’ve already supplied the answer. I don’t know what’s happened, but I do know it’s too late for you to turn back.’

An important decision demanded long, serious deliberation, so when Dulcie opened the palatial wardrobe to select something suitable for the coming evening she went through the multitude of dresses with great care.

‘How did I ever buy all this?’ she murmured.

She’d gone to Feltham’s, as instructed, and found the staff already primed with Roscoe’s demands. As these would have resulted in her looking like a Christmas tree Dulcie had waved them aside and insisted on her own kind of discreet elegance. After four outfits she tried to call a halt, but the superior person assigned to assist her was horrified.

‘Mr Harrison said the bill must be at least twenty thousand,’ she’d murmured.

‘Twenty thou—? He can wear them then.’

‘He’ll be most displeased if we don’t live up to his expectations. It could cost me my job.’

Put like that, it became a duty to spend money, and by the time she'd left the luxury store she was the owner of five cocktail dresses, two glamorous evening gowns, three pairs of designer jeans, any number of designer sweaters, a mountain of silk and satin underwear, and a collection of summer dresses. Some expensive makeup and perfume, plus several items of luggage completed the list.

She surveyed her booty now, hanging in the hotel's luxurious, air-conditioned closets, in a mood of ironic depression. This ought to have been a fun job, the chance to be Cinderella at the ball. If only it hadn't been Venice, and if only the high life she was to lead hadn't been so much like the life her Prince Charmless had expected of her.

Why had she accepted this assignment, in a place where every sight and sound would hurt her. Was she mad?

Then she set her chin. This was a chance to make a man pay for his crimes against women. She must never forget that.

She took so long making her choice that she was late when she finally hurried downstairs wearing a cocktail dress of pale-blue silk organza with silver filigree accessories. Her silver shoes had heels of only one inch, which was the nearest she could get to 'sensible'.

Antonio's was a tiny place with tables outside, sheltered by a leaf-hung trellis. It looked charming, but there was something missing. Him!

No matter, he'd be inside. She sauntered in, looking casual,

but her air of indifference fell away as she saw no sign of him here either.

He'd stood her up!

It was the one thing she hadn't thought of.

Be reasonable, she thought. He's just a few minutes late—like you.

That's different, replied her awkward self. He's supposed to be trying to seduce me, and he can't even be bothered to do it properly.

Setting her jaw she marched out and collided with a man hurtling himself through the door in the other direction.

'Mio dio!' Guido exploded in passionate relief. 'I thought you'd stood me up.'

'I—?'

'When you didn't come I thought you'd changed your mind. I've been looking for you.'

'I was only ten minutes late,' she protested.

'Ten minutes, ten hours? It felt like forever. I suddenly realised that I don't know your name. You might have vanished and how could I have found you again? But I've found you now.' He took her hand. 'Come with me.'

He was walking away, drawing her behind him, before she could stop and think that once more he'd reversed their roles, so that he was now giving orders. But she followed him, eager to see where he would lead her, and curiously content in his company.

He'd changed out of his working clothes into jeans and a shirt

of such snowy whiteness that it gave him an air of elegance, and made a contrast with his lightly tanned skin.

‘You could have found me quite easily,’ she pointed out as they strolled hand in hand. ‘You know my hotel.’

‘To be sure, I could go into the Vittorio and say the lady in their best suite has given me the elbow and would they please tell me her name? Then I think I should start running before they throw me out. They’re used to dealing with dodgy characters.’

‘Are you a dodgy character?’ she asked with interest.

‘They’d certainly think so if I told them that tale. Now where shall we go?’

‘You’re the one who knows Venice.’

‘And from the depths of my expert knowledge I say that we should start with an ice cream.’

‘Yes please,’ she said at once. There was something about ice cream that made a child of her again. He picked up the echo and grinned boyishly.

‘Come on.’

He led her into a maze, where streets and canals soon blurred into one. Flagstones underfoot, alleys so narrow that the old buildings almost seemed to touch each other overhead, tiny bridges where they lingered to watch the boats drift underneath.

‘It’s all so peaceful,’ she said in wonder.

‘That’s because there are no cars.’

‘Of course.’ She looked around her. ‘I hadn’t even realised, but it’s obvious.’ She looked around her again. ‘There’s nowhere for

cars to go.'

'Right,' he said with deep satisfaction. 'Nowhere at all. They can leave the mainland and come out over the causeway as far as the terminal. But then people have to get out and walk. If they don't want to walk they go by boat. But they don't bring their smelly, stinking cars into my city.'

'Your city? You keep saying that.'

'Every true Venetian speaks of Venice as his city. He pretends that he owns it, to hide the fact that it owns him. It's a possessive mother who won't release him. Wherever he goes in the world this perfect place goes with him, holding onto him, drawing him back.' He stopped himself with an awkward laugh. 'Now Venice thinks we should go and eat ice cream.'

He took her to a small café by a little canal so quiet that the world might have forgotten it. He summoned a waiter, talking to him in a language Dulcie didn't recognise, and making expansive gestures, while giving her a look of wicked mischief.

'Were you speaking Italian?' she asked when they were alone again.

'Venetian dialect.'

'It sounds like a different language to Italian.'

'In effect it is.'

'It's a bit hard on tourists who learn a bit of Italian for their vacation, and then find you speaking Venetian.'

'We speak Italian and English for the tourists, but amongst ourselves we speak our dialect because we are Venetian.'



‘Like a another country,’ she said thoughtfully.

‘Of course. Venice was once an independent republic, not just a province of Italy, but a state in its own right. And that’s still how we feel. That is our pride, to be Venetian first, before all other allegiances.’

As before, there was a glow on his face that told her he felt passionately about this subject. She began to watch him intently, eager to hear more, but suddenly the waiter appeared with their order, and he fell silent. She had a sense of let-down, and promised herself that she would draw him back to this subject later.

She understood her companion’s mischievous expression when two huge dishes of vanilla and chocolate ice cream were brought to the table, plus two jugs, one containing chocolate sauce and one containing cream.

‘I ordered chocolate because it’s my favourite,’ he explained.

‘Suppose it isn’t mine?’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll finish it for you.’

She gave an involuntary choke of laughter, and bit it back, remembering the aloof role she was supposed to be playing. But she made the mistake of meeting his eyes, daring her not to laugh, so that she had to give in.

‘Now tell me your name,’ he insisted.

‘It’s—Dulcie.’ She was mysteriously reluctant to say the rest.

‘Only Dulcie?’

‘Lady Dulcie Maddox.’

He raised his eyebrows. 'An aristocrat?'

'A very minor one.'

'But you have a title?'

'My father has the title. He's an earl. In Italy he would be a count.'

A strange look came over his face. 'A—count?' he echoed slowly. 'You are the daughter of a count?'

'Of an earl. Does it matter?'

She had the odd impression that he pulled himself together. 'Of course you didn't want to tell me that. I understand.'

'What do you understand?' she demanded, nettled.

He shrugged. 'Dulcie can do as she pleases, but Lady Dulcie can't let a gondolier think he picked her up.'

'You didn't pick me up,' she said, feeling uneasy, since she could hardly admit that she'd come here to pick him up. 'I don't care how we got to know each other. I'm just glad that we did.'

'So am I because—because I have many things I want to say to you. But I can't say them now. It's too soon.'

'It's too soon for you to know you want to say them.'

He shook his head. 'Oh, no,' he said quietly, 'It's not too soon for that.'

## CHAPTER THREE

‘YOU must forgive me if I talk too much about Venice,’ he said. ‘I forget that everyone must feel the same about their own home town.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘I can’t imagine feeling like that about London.’

‘That’s where you live?’

‘It is now, but I was raised on my father’s estate—’

‘Ah yes, Poppa the earl. And he has huge ancestral acres, yes?’

‘Huge,’ she agreed, mentally editing out the mortgages.

‘So you were raised in the country?’ he encouraged her.

‘Yes, and I remember how peaceful it was there too. I used to sit by my bedroom window at dawn and watch the trees creeping out of the mist. I’d pretend they were friendly giants who could only visit me in the half-light, and I’d write stories in my head about the things they did—’ she stopped and shrugged, embarrassed to have been lured into self-revelation.

But he was looking at her with interest. ‘Go on,’ he said.

She began to talk about her home, the childhood she’d spent there, and the imaginary friends she’d created, for her only sibling was a brother too much older than herself to be any fun. Soon she forgot all else except the pleasure of talking to someone who appeared absorbed in what she had to say. None of her family had the remotest sympathy with her ‘dreaming’, and at last she’d

given it up in favour of good sense. Or so she'd told herself. Now she began to wonder if this side of herself had merely gone underground, to be brought back to life with the perfect listener on the perfect evening.

At some point he paid for the ice cream and took her arm to lead her out, murmuring about eating the next part of the meal elsewhere. But he did it without taking his attention from her, or interrupting the flow, and when she found herself crossing a bridge a few minutes later she wasn't quite sure how she'd arrived there.

He found another restaurant and ordered without asking her. That was how she discovered 'Venetian oysters', the shells stuffed with caviar with pepper and lemon juice, served on ice with brown bread and butter. It was ten times as good as the splendid meal served in Roscoe's house, prepared by his expensive chef. Her companion read her face, and grinned.

'We do the best cooking in the world,' he asserted without a trace of modesty.

'I believe you, I believe you,' she said fervently. 'This is pure heaven.'

'You don't mind my ordering for you?'

She shook her head. 'I wouldn't know what to ask for anyway.'

'Then you place yourself totally in my hands. Bene!'

'I didn't exactly say that,' she protested. 'I said you could choose the food.'

'Since we're eating, that's the same thing.'

'Well, I'm on my guard. I've heard about gondoliers,' she teased.

'And what exactly have you heard?' he was teasing her back.

'That you're a bunch of Romeos—'

'Not Romeos, Casanovas,' he corrected her seriously.

'Does it make a difference?' she asked, wondering if it was ever possible to disconcert this madman.

'Of course. This is Casanova's city. In the Piazza San Marco you can still see Florian's, the coffee-house where he used to go. Also he was imprisoned in Venice. So, you were saying—'

'You mean I can finish now?'

He placed a finger over his mouth. 'Not another word.'

'I don't believe you. Where was I?'

'We're all Casanovas—'

'Who count the girls as they come off the planes.'

'But of course we do,' he agreed shamelessly. 'Because we're always looking for the one perfect one.'

'Phooey! Who cares about perfection if it's only for a few days?'

'I always care about perfection. It matters.'

He wasn't joking any more and she was impelled to reply seriously. 'But everything can't be perfect. The world is full of imperfection.'

'Of course. That's why perfection matters. But you must know how to seek it in the little things as well as the great. Look out there.'

He pointed through the window to where the sun was setting exactly between two high buildings, looking like a stream of gold descending into the earth.

‘Do you think the architect knew he was achieving exactly that perfect effect when he created those buildings?’ he asked her. ‘It seems fantastic, but I like to believe that he did. Perfection is where you find it.’

‘Or where you think you’ve found it. Sometimes you must discover that you’re wrong.’

‘Yes,’ he said after a moment. ‘And then nothing looks quite the same again.’ Then his laughter broke out again. ‘Why are we being so serious? That comes later.’

‘Oh, really? You’ve got our conversation all mapped out then?’

‘I think we’re travelling a well-worn path, you and I.’

‘I’m not going to ask you which path. It might mean getting too serious again, and I’m here for fun.’

He regarded her quizzically. ‘Are you saying that’s why you came to Venice—looking for a holiday romance?’

‘No, I—’ Absurdly, the question caught her off-guard. ‘No, that’s not why.’

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked at once. ‘Have I said something to hurt you?’

‘No, of course not.’

It was hard because this man was shrewder and subtler than she had allowed for. His eyes were warm and concerned, studying her anxiously, but she needed to evade them, lest they looked too

deep.

‘That was lovely,’ she said, indicating her empty plate. ‘What have you decided on now?’

‘Polastri Pini e Boni,’ he declared at once.

‘And that is—?’ She was searching the menu for enlightenment. ‘I can’t find it.’

‘It’s chicken, stuffed with herbs, cheese and almonds. You won’t find it on the menu. They don’t do it here.’

‘Then—?’

‘I’m going to take you to a place where they do serve it.’

‘Are we going to have every course in a different place?’ she asked, slightly giddy at the thought.

‘Of course. It’s the ideal way to eat. Come on.’

As soon as they were outside she became completely lost. Now they were far off the tourist track, plunging into narrow, flagstoned streets that she knew were called calle. High overhead the last of the daylight was almost blocked out by washing strung between buildings, across the street.

‘I thought all the streets were water,’ she observed as they strolled along, not hurrying.

‘No, there are plenty of places where it’s possible to walk, but sooner or later one always comes to water.’

‘But why build it like this in the first place?’

‘Many centuries ago, my ancestors were running from their enemies. They fled the mainland, out into the lagoon where there were a mass of tiny islands, and they settled there. They drove

stakes deep into the water to create foundations, built bridges between the islands, and so created a unity that became a city.'

'You mean this canal beneath us—' they were crossing a small bridge '—was the seaway between two separate islands? It's only about twelve feet wide.'

'They were miracle workers. And a miracle is what they created.'

'But how? It just—just defies all the laws of architecture, of science, of common sense—'

'Oh, common sense—' he said dismissively.

'I believe in it,' she said defiantly.

'Then heaven help you! It means nothing. It creates nothing, it's the opposite of a miracle. Look about you. As you say, Venice defies common sense, and yet it exists.'

'I can't deny that.'

'So much for common sense! Never resort to it again. It's the root of all the troubles in the world.'

'I'm afraid I can't help it,' she confessed. 'I grew up sensible, reliable, practical—'

He put his hands over his ears. 'Stop, stop!' he begged. 'I can't bear any more of these dreadful words. I must feed you quickly and make you well again.'

He hustled her down some steps and into a door that was almost hidden in shadows. Behind it was a tiny restaurant which was almost full despite the fact that it seemed to be in hiding. One taste of the chicken was enough to explain this contradiction. If



the last course had brought her to the gates of heaven, this one ushered her through.

Guido watched her with pleasure, intent on weaving a spell around her. He wanted her securely in his magic net before he was ready to reveal certain things about himself. He was an honest man, with a high regard for the truth, but he knew that truth wasn't always reached by sticking too rigidly to the facts.

Then, as if making his very thoughts tangible, a hand clapped him on the shoulder and a cheerful voice said, 'Hey, Guido! Fancy seeing you here!'

It was Alberto, a friend and employee, who managed his glass factory, more than slightly tipsy, full of good cheer, and about to blow his cover.

Guido tensed and his glance flew to Dulcie who was mercifully absorbed in feeding a kitten that had appeared under their table. She hadn't heard Alberto call him Guido but disaster was approaching fast. The one ray of hope was that Alberto was speaking in Venetian. Grabbing his friend's wrist Guido muttered in the same language.

'Hello, old friend. Do me a favour. Get lost.'

'That's not very friendly Gui—'

'I'm not feeling friendly. Now be a good fellow and take yourself off.'

Alberto stared, then he caught sight of Dulcie and his expression cleared. 'Aha! A beautiful lady. You devil. Let me make her acquaintance.'

‘You’ll make the acquaintance of the canal in a minute.’ Guido’s smile never wavered as he uttered this half-serious threat.

‘Hey, all right!’ Alberto became placating, backing off. ‘If it’s like that—’

‘I’m warning you—another word—’

‘Fine, I’m going.’

Guido watched him depart, feeling as if he’d aged ten years. He should have taken Dulcie to some place where nobody knew him, but where, in Venice, was he to find such a place?

Problems crowded in on him. Soon he must tell her of his innocent deception, but how to do it needed a lot of thought. Never mind. He would ‘tap-dance’ his way out of that problem when the time came. He was good at that because to a warm-hearted man with a tangled personal life tap-dancing was a necessary skill.

‘If you’ve finished, let’s walk again,’ he said. ‘Venice will have changed.’

She saw what he meant as they stepped outside. Night had created a different city. Little alleys that had led to mysterious corners now vanished into total darkness, and lights glittered like jewels reflected in the black water. He led her onto a small bridge and stood back, letting her drink in the beauty in her own way, in peace.

Already there were a thousand things he wanted to say to her, but he held back, fearful of breaking the spell by going too fast.

He could wait, and let Venice do its work for him.

Dulcie watched and listened, entranced. Faintly, in the distance, she could hear the sound of mandolins, and occasionally a strange, soft, eerie yodel.

‘Whatever is that sound?’

‘It’s the cry a gondolier gives as he approaches a corner,’ he said. ‘With twenty-two feet of boat in front of him he has to warn any traffic crossing his path, otherwise they’d be colliding all the time.’

As he spoke there was another yodel close by, and the prow of a gondola appeared around the corner, turning into the canal and heading for them. Dulcie leaned over the bridge, watching the boat with its young lovers clasped in an embrace. Slowly they drew apart, their faces illuminated by the lights from the bridge.

Dulcie felt a cold hand clutch her stomach. The man—it couldn’t be—she was imagining things. As the gondola glided beneath she rushed to the other side of the bridge in a vain attempt to see better. But that was worse. There was only the back of his head. Perversely this only increased her conviction that she’d seen Simon.

A rich bride, a honeymoon in Venice, these were the things he’d wanted. But it was only four months since they’d parted. Could he have replaced one bride with another so fast? Suddenly she’d moved back in time to a turmoil of pain, disillusion, rejection, mistrust.

‘Dulcie, what is it?’

She felt strong hands seize her, turn her. His face was dark.

‘Tell me what’s the matter.’

‘Nothing.’

‘That man—you knew him—’

‘No—I thought I did, but it couldn’t have been him, not so soon—not here of all places—I don’t know, I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘I see,’ he said slowly. ‘It’s like that.’

‘You don’t know what it’s like,’ she cried angrily. ‘You don’t know anything.’

‘You loved him, and you thought you would be here with him. That much is obvious. And it wasn’t so very long ago. So perhaps you love him still?’

‘It wasn’t him,’ she said, trying to sound firm. ‘Just someone else who looked a bit like him.’

‘But you’re avoiding my question. Do you still love him? Or don’t you know?’

‘Yes—no—I don’t know. I don’t know anything.’

‘Were you coming to Venice for your honeymoon?’

‘Yes,’ she sighed.

‘And now you come here alone—to think of what might have been?’

That did it.

‘Rubbish!’ she said trenchantly. ‘Absolute codswallop! How dare you suggest that I’m some sort of—of—I don’t know, some sort of forlorn maiden trailing in the shadow of a dead love. Of

all the sentimental drivel I ever heard—I've a good mind to—'

How he laughed. 'Brava! Brava! I knew you were stronger than that. Whatever he did to you, you won't be crushed. Don't get mad, get even! Shall we follow and tip him into the water?'

'Don't be idiotic,' she said, joining in his laughter unwillingly. 'I don't even know that it's him.'

'Let's tip him in the water anyway,' he suggested hopefully.

'You clown. Whatever for?'

'As a warning to all men to be careful how they treat women in future.'

'Let's forget him,' she said hastily. She didn't know what wicked imp had made him voice the very idea that had brought her here, but it was something she couldn't afford to think of just now.

'Yes, let's forget him and plan what we shall do tomorrow. There's so much I want to show you—'

'What about your gondola? It's your living.'

'Not tomorrow. Tomorrow I forget work and think only of you.'

'Oh, really,' she teased. 'Suppose I have other ideas?'

He looked crestfallen. 'There's another man you'd rather spend the day with?'

'No, I—' she bit back the rest, realising that she'd walked into a trap.

'You'd rather spend the day with me than any other man?' he said at once. 'Bene! That's what I hoped.'

‘You’re twisting my words. Maybe I want to spend the day alone.’

‘Do you?’

He wasn’t teasing any more, and neither was she.

‘No,’ she said quietly.

‘We could go to the seaside, if you like?’

‘Does it have a really sandy beach?’ she asked longingly.

‘I promise you a really sandy beach. Venice doesn’t just have the best cooking in the world, it also has the best beach in the world.’

‘Anything else?’

‘The best swimming, and the best company. Me.’

He was laughing again, playing the jester, inviting her to mock him. Then suddenly he drew her into his arms, holding her close, but not kissing her, content just to embrace. He drew back a little and touched her face with his hands, brushing back stray tendrils of hair, and studying her intently.

‘Dulcie,’ he whispered. ‘There’s so much—but not now—this isn’t the right time.’

A tremor of alarm went through her. This was too sweet, too delightful. What was she thinking of?

‘I can’t,’ she said. ‘I can’t see you tomorrow.’

‘Then the next day—’

‘No, I can’t see you again,’ she said desperately. ‘I’m going home. I should never have come here. Please let me go.’

He made no attempt to hold onto her as she broke free and

began to run down the nearest calle. She simply had to get away from what was happening here. It shocked and confused her. Nothing was going according to plan.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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