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Their hotel was near the train station, close enough for Miriam and Alan to walk there. She hefted their carry-on bags while he picked up their two suitcases and followed her down the steps. At the docks along the Grand Canal, people were getting out of a long flat-topped passenger boat as three gondolas glided away across the greenish-blue water. The air smelled of sulphur and salt water and gasoline and faintly of rotting fish.

Alan had a map showing the location of the hotel. Miriam knew that he would not look at it and would only get annoyed if she stopped and rummaged in her bag for her own map. He would never look at a map or ask directions. In Florence, it had taken them forty minutes to get to the Uffizi from the Piazza Santa Croce because Alan knew exactly where the Uffizi was and how to get there and you couldn't miss the place because it was only a five or ten-minute walk from the Piazza Santa Croce.

He led her away from the Grand Canal to a narrow cobblestoned walkway that ran between a row of buildings and then past kiosks and booths offering postcards, marionettes, newspapers, magazines,

cheap jewelry, T-shirts, toy gondolas, and masks. The hotel, a square yellow six-storey structure, turned out to be only a five-minute walk from the station. Miriam sat on a sofa in the lobby while Alan checked them in, studying the map she had bought after getting off the train. Her friend Leah had told Miriam that she would need a good map in Venice. Her hands shook as she refolded the map. The strain of trying to be calm during the train trip was catching up with her. If she dwelled too much on the problems awaiting her and Alan when they got home, she would panic and lapse into one of the fits of hysterical weeping that so enraged him.

“It's Room 414.” She looked up as Alan handed her a metal key attached to a small plastic cylinder bearing the room number. A porter in a red uniform was with him, carrying the suitcases.

She followed her husband and the porter through the lobby to the elevator. Like the lifts in their hotels in Rome and Florence, the elevator was a closet-sized conveyance barely large enough for the three of them and the luggage. The elevator shook as it stopped at their floor. The hallway to their room had pale walls with gold trim and dark red carpeting. The porter opened the door, then led them inside, setting the bags down near a wooden closet.

“Grazie,” Alan murmured. “Prego,” the porter replied. Alan handed him a tip; the door closed behind the porter. Another minefield now lay ahead of them, that dangerous stretch of time when they would rest in their hotel room before unpacking, when one or the other of them might say the wrong thing because there was nothing else to distract them from each other. An invisible band tightened around her chest.

“Our gondola ride's at seven,” Alan said. Miriam looked at her watch and saw that it was only five. “I checked at the desk. We have to go over to that dock near the train station. It'll cost about 140,000 lire.”

“Isn't that kind of high? That's something like a hundred dollars, isn't it?” The Italian currency still confused her, even with a pocket calculator, and the unfamiliar bills seemed like toy money.

“More like eighty, but you can't exactly come to Venice without taking a gondola ride.”

The small room had two twin beds pushed together and a narrow third bed pushed against the wall. “It's sweltering in here,” Miriam said.

“Better open the window, then, because there isn't any air conditioning. They told me at the desk. They're doing repairs. Maybe we won't need it. I mean, it is late September.”

Miriam pulled back the curtains, then opened the large windows. The room overlooked the watery green span of the Grand Canal, a walkway alongside it, and, just below, an open area dotted with kiosks. Another hotel, painted pink, was across the way, its flower-lined courtyard filled with empty tables covered with pink tablecloths. The miasmatic air still smelled of sulphur, salt, and decay.

She said, “It isn't what I expected.”

Alan let out a sigh. “Don't start, Miri.”

“I didn't mean—” Miriam stopped herself. She had almost risen to the bait. She had meant to say, but in a light, bantering tone, that she didn't expect her first sights in Venice to be a lot of shops and booths selling tacky souvenirs. Alan would have retorted with quiet but bitter words about how he was sorry they couldn't afford some place closer to Saint Mark's Square. She would try to apologize, but by then he would have retreated into one of his silences. He would be thinking that she was after him again

because nothing had turned out the way they had hoped, and he knew that she blamed him for a lot of that. She was not blaming him for anything at the moment, but she had done so often enough in the past. She probably deserved to feel guilty now for all the times she had cut away at him. He had picked at her, too, usually when she was at her most vulnerable, as if her unhappiness made her give off pheromones that only made him want to hurt her more.

He had told her six months ago that they should go to Italy, because they had never been and had always wanted to go. "We can't afford it," she had told him. "You're right," he had replied, "we can't. We also won't be able to afford it later, and by then we'll be too old to enjoy the trip. We'll never be able to afford it. So we might as well go now." His mouth had twisted in the expression she thought of as his not-quite-smile, the look he had whenever he was feeling especially bitter.

Miriam turned away from the window and sat down in the room's only chair, next to the small desk. Alan was sitting on one of the beds. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes. Miriam lit one of her own. She did not have to feel guilty about smoking over here, where non-smoking areas seemed nonexistent. Alan, after quitting for three years, had relapsed last spring, so she did not have to feel guilty about smoking around him, either. She no longer had to listen to him harp at her about the dangers of side smoke and how he would not come to visit her in the hospital if she developed lung cancer and that he could barely bring himself to kiss her sometimes. He did not kiss her that much anyway.

"There's actually kind of a nice breeze," Miriam said. "We probably don't need any air conditioning." She still felt too warm, but did not want to admit that out loud. He would blame her discomfort on menopause and tell her to pester her gynecologist for more goddamned hormones so that she wouldn't be so bitchy and have so many hot flashes. She would have to remind him that larger doses were more dangerous and that the estrogen made her gain weight and that he was already nagging at her to lose a few pounds. They had gone through that particular argument before.

"Want a drink?" Alan asked.

"Sure."

He reached into one of the carry-ons and took out a bottle of Scotch as Miriam went into the bathroom to look for glasses. There was a drain in both the floor and the shower stall, which had no curtain. The stall looked forlorn without a curtain; the curved metal soap holder made her think of a hand held out in supplication. Tears sprang to her eyes; she swallowed hard. Tears came much too easily to her lately. She could not start crying now. Alan would explode if she did. "I'm doing my best, Miri. I'm trying as hard as I can, but I can't control the world. Do you have to cry so much? Do I have to worry about you all the time on top of everything else? Can't you ever be happy?"

Three glasses were near the sink. Miriam brought them out to Alan. He poured a couple of fingers of Scotch for each of them, then began to unpack. She drank while watching him hang up his clothes. She would wait until he was in the shower before she unpacked her own.

"Someday," Vera Massie used to say, "I'm going to move to Venice. I'll live in a palazzo and have a gondolier for a lover." Vera had been her best friend in college. Strange that Miriam should think of her now, when she had lost track of Vera long ago. They had said such things back then, believing that at least a few of them might happen. Vera would paint and Miriam would write articles for magazines. They would travel to Venice, Nairobi, Amman, Istanbul, Sydney, Monte Carlo, and Rio de Janeiro, fall in love with guides, adventurers, gamblers, artists, and mysterious men with no visible means of support, and somehow pick up enough at odd jobs between trips to support themselves.

Well, Miriam told herself, at least I made it to Venice, and wondered what Vera would have thought of the circumstances. Her old friend would not have imagined back then that Miriam would travel there only in an effort to shore up a failing marriage and to pretend, for a while, that her troubles were not that serious.

It was probably just as well that she had lost track of Vera, who had possessed an enviable talent for being cheerful and enjoying the moment, whatever problems might lie ahead. Vera would have been disappointed in what Miriam had become.

* * * *

The sky was grayer, but still light when they met the gondolier by the dock. Alternating between Alan's halting Italian and the gondolier's slightly better English, the two men finally managed to agree that the ride would be an hour long and would cost only 110,000 lire and that it would take them along some of the side canals.

The gondolier helped Miriam into the stern of the craft. She sat down as Alan climbed in next to her, followed by the gondolier. The gondola rocked slightly as they drifted away from the dock. Four gondolas carrying small groups of graying and white-haired passengers were gliding toward them; in a fifth gondola, a man standing on the platform next to a gondolier sang as a man in the middle of the gondola played an accordion. The elderly passengers lifted their plastic cups in a toast, saluting Miriam and Alan as they passed.

The gondolier behind them shouted to one of the other gondoliers, who responded with a stream of Italian. "What are they saying?" Miriam asked.

Alan leaned back in his seat and slipped his arm over her shoulders. "Can't tell," he said. "People say that even other Italians don't understand this dialect too well." He smiled. "Bet they cultivate it deliberately. Probably don't want any of the passengers to know what they're saying." He had been listening to language tapes and practicing with a phrase book ever since they had decided to take this trip.

In some sense, Miriam thought, she had married the adventurer she had hoped to fall in love with when younger. Alan was, however, an adventurer who had failed at being truly adventurous. He picked up languages easily—French during a summer abroad in high school, German during his Army days, when he had lucked out and ended up in Europe instead of Vietnam, some Spanish when his business had started hiring more Latino construction workers. His plans for their life had been both straightforward and risky. His business would grow, even if they had to stick their necks out in the beginning. People always needed new houses, and he knew he could not stand working for someone else. When they were bringing in more money, Miriam could quit her job and they would travel, as they had always intended to do. After their children came, the plan had been to wait until they were old enough so that the family could travel together.

They had gotten no farther away than a winter vacation in Cancun and a summer vacation, years later, in the Canadian Rockies, because the business had required more and more of Alan's time. By the time they had been ready to abandon armchair travel for the real thing, Alan was struggling to keep his business afloat, Miriam was hanging on to her job wondering when the insurance company would lay her off, their daughter Joelle had dropped out of her third college in a row to move in with her boyfriend, and Jason had developed his substance abuse problem. Substance abuse, they called it, as if her son's difficulties were somehow metaphysical and might have been solved if he didn't have to live in a material world made of substance that even physicists couldn't understand.

Alan's arm tensed around her. "What's the matter now?" he said, and she heard the tightness in his voice, the sound of exasperation that could quickly turn into anger.

"Nothing," she replied, trying to smile. They were here to have a good time, to live in the present, not to worry about failing businesses, troubled children, and lost dreams.

A motorboat passed them, making the gondola rock a little. Their gondolier was steering into a side canal. The sounds of motors, singing gondoliers, and accordions abruptly ceased.

The sudden silence startled her. This canal was narrow, with stained and peeling pastel walls rising up on either side. A few motorboats were tied up near walkways and stone steps leading to doors. The shutters of several overhead windows had been opened, and clothes hung from ropes stretched between windows, but the buildings seemed empty. Miriam heard no voices and saw no movements inside the windows. The silence was unnerving, as though the crowds of tourists and residents had suddenly abandoned the city. Perhaps all the people were out, riding in gondolas and walking along the narrow streets and meeting friends for dinner.

How fanciful of her to imagine that Venice was populated by people who had nothing better to do than to take an evening stroll or boat ride, sit around drinking wine, make their own contributions to the city's works of art, and admire the decaying beauty of their atmospheric homes. Many of Venice's citizens would still be engaged in the necessary tasks of guiding herds of tourists to various sites, cooking and serving hotel and restaurant dinners, selling souvenirs. Some of them might work in the refineries across the lagoon during the day, coming back only at night. Most of the people in this region apparently lived over there on the mainland, under smoggy gray clouds and amid factories and storage tanks. Many of them might not even get to this graceful city that often.

The gondola was approaching a small arched bridge. A few people stood there, unmoving, gazing down at the canal. How still they were, Miriam thought, almost as if they were made of stone. The air shimmered, making auras glow around the people on the bridge. She touched her head reflexively, afraid a migraine might be coming on. Alan would blame her for ruining her vacation and tell her that she had brought the attack of migraine on herself.

"What's the itinerary for tomorrow?" Alan asked then, his voice sounding strangely hollow.

Miriam pressed her lips together. He could not simply enjoy the gondola ride; he had to keep thinking ahead. They had to make sure that they had plenty of sightseeing planned, so that they could keep up the illusion that they were having a vacation, an escape from which they would return refreshed, that this trip would somehow heal everything that had gone wrong between them. They had to keep busy, or otherwise there might be too much time to think and to brood and to argue.

"There's that place Leah told us about, that showroom that sells Murano glass," Miriam said at last. "It's near St. Mark's Square, so we can see the church afterwards. The tour for English-speaking tourists starts at eleven." If they were lucky, they might meet a congenial couple during the tour of the church, people they could have lunch with so that they wouldn't have to get through lunch by themselves. "Then we can see the Doge's Palace."

"Let's do that by ourselves, okay? I don't want to be following a herd around for that, too."

"Fine," she said. "I'm sure we can buy a guide at the entrance." That might keep them busy until dinner, and Alan had taken the precaution of making reservations for that already.

“Have to remind myself,” he said, “to call Bernie after breakfast.” Bernie was Alan's attorney. Lately, Alan had not told her much about his ever more frequent meetings with Bernie. Maybe he was thinking of declaring bankruptcy. He would come home one day and tell her that his business had finally gone belly-up. He would say that he had kept it from her because he did not want her fretting over everything and making herself sick, even though she had been worrying about everything and making herself sick all along anyway.

“Is it so important it can't wait?” Miriam asked.

“Yeah, it is,” and she knew that he would not tell her what it was.

The gondola glided around a corner into another canal. Miriam was growing used to the odor of decay, and the dark green water was still. For a moment, she was at peace, taking pleasure in the silvery light and the soft sound of water lapping against stones. Had they come here when they were younger, while they were still living together or after they had first been married, by now Alan would be trying to kiss her. She would have protested, wondering what the gondolier might think, and Alan would have assured her that the man had probably steered plenty of lovers deep in the throes of passion along this canal. They would have giggled and cuddled and then gone back to their hotel room to make love before dinner.

She could not imagine that happening now. They should have come to Venice when they were younger, when they would have loved Venice for what it was and not only as an escape. She thought of how Venice was slowly sinking, of the hordes of tourists who came here trying to recapture the sense of beauty, joy, or romance they had lost, whose demands had turned so much of this city into more of a theme park than a place of romance, who roamed over these islands and along the canals in herds. One day, they would all come back to find their beloved city under water, forever lost to them.

She turned toward Alan, about to speak, then forgot what she was going to say. His brown eyes stared into hers for a moment, then looked away. He had lost some weight recently, and now the tanned and leathery skin of his face sagged more, making him look older.

A longing for what she and Alan had once been to each other overwhelmed her. He had once loved her enough to resent every moment away from her; she had always trusted him to be at her side when she needed him. Now their troubles had poisoned even the wellsprings of love she used to think could never be tainted.

A movement caught her eye; she looked up. A woman was watching from a window up ahead, gazing down at the canal. Somebody was home in one of these houses after all. Miriam caught a glimpse of masses of pale hair, then lifted a hand to wave. The woman moved her hand in an arc, as if wiping an invisible window; the gesture seemed oddly familiar.

I know you, Miriam thought. She blinked, and the woman was gone.

Alan touched her hand. She was suddenly worried about him, afraid that he was keeping too much from her. Tell me what's wrong, she wanted to say. Tell me about all the problems, and we'll work them out together, the way we used to do. It doesn't have to be like this; I can meet you halfway. I won't pick at you, and in return you can listen to me, stop turning away from me, stop looking at me with that not-quite-smile on your face that tells me you're sorry you ever married me. All we have to do is remember how we once felt about each other, and everything else will fall into place.

The sounds of voices suddenly washed over her in a wave, nearly deafening her. The gondola drifted toward another bridge, this one crowded with Asian tourists. Miriam raised a hand tentatively; the people on the bridge grinned and waved and chattered among themselves. The water was slightly choppy, rocking the gondola. Up ahead, beyond the walls on either side of them, she could now see the broad, greenish expanse of the Grand Canal.

* * * *

They ate breakfast in their hotel, in the indoor dining room next to the outdoor tables where they had eaten last night. Miriam had gotten used to the strong Italian coffee, but still had to put milk in it to make it palatable, something she never did at home. Alan had asked the waiter to bring butter and was putting some on one of his hard rolls. His doctor had warned him about his cholesterol, but the butter would probably do him less harm than his cigarettes.

At the tables on the opposite side of the room, which each bore a marker near the floral centerpiece with the words "American Express," a tour group of older gray-haired people were eating bowls of cereal. Despite their advanced age, the tourists all looked fit and energetic and blatantly cheerful. Almost all of them were couples. Miriam wondered how they had managed to live for so long and stay married to their spouses without looking as though they had regrets.

Alan finished his coffee. "Maybe you can buy a map of the vaporetto routes," he said, "while I go upstairs and make that call to Bernie."

She would not ask him about the call. They had managed a pleasant dinner the night before, largely because a couple in the American Express group, a retired engineer and his wife from Tampa, had struck up a conversation with them from their table. They had not gotten off to a good start that morning. The noise of boat traffic, loud talking, and singing gondoliers outside their open window had kept Alan awake for much of the night. Miriam would not allow herself to ruin breakfast with questions about his business.

"Vaporetto routes?" she asked, not sure of what Alan had meant.

"Vaporetto," he said as he crumpled his napkin. "The public boats, the water buses. The plural is vaporetti." He got to his feet. "Go to one of those booths and get a map. Just say, 'Vorrei comprare una carta di vaporetti.' That ought to do the job. If you want to be polite, throw in a 'per favore' and say 'grazie' afterwards. Even you ought to be able to manage that."

He turned and walked away. How odd that she could feel hurt by his remark. She should be used to such comments by now.

Miriam stood up and headed toward the lobby. The retired couple from Tampa waved at her as she passed their table. She wondered if she and Alan would ever be able to afford to retire. She thought of what he had said last night, just before they had gone downstairs to have dinner. "You know what would solve our problems? If I dropped dead. Darrell could take over the business and then he could decide who to lay off next year. The insurance would take care of you, and Jason and Joelle would just have to look out for themselves. And I wouldn't have to be bothered any more, which would be one hell of a relief." She had been too shocked to do what she should have done, embrace him and tell him that she could not bear to have him think that way.

She went outside. The narrow street was already crowded with tourists; they seemed to be everywhere. She wandered toward the open area where several vendors had set up their booths and asked in English for a map and schedule of the vaporetto routes. The man in the booth handed them to her; so much for Alan's sarcastic language lesson at breakfast.

She walked toward the Grand Canal. In a few minutes, she would go inside and wait in the lobby, trying not to look too impatient when Alan finally met her there.

“Miri,” a voice said. “Miriam Feyn.”

Miriam looked up. Near the stone steps leading down to the water stood a tall, slender woman in a red T-shirt and baggy jeans. Her unruly long hair was gray, almost white, but she still wore it as she had when younger, in a mass of waves that fell nearly to her waist.

“Vera Massie!” Miriam said, and hurried toward her. “I can’t believe it!” They clasped hands and then hugged each other. “We just got here yesterday, on the train from Milan.” She stepped back, gripping her old friend by the elbows. “We actually got to Venice at the same time.”

“Actually, I’ve been here for a while,” the other woman said.

“You mean you live here?” Miriam asked.

“In a manner of speaking.”

Miriam felt a pang of envy. Maybe Vera was leading the kind of life they had once imagined for themselves. The other woman guided Miriam toward the courtyard of the pink hotel across the way; they sat down at one of the tables.

No one else seemed to be sitting here. Miriam looked around for a waiter, then turned back to Vera. “Vera Massie,” she said. “I can’t believe it.”

“Vera Langella,” Vera said. “I thought of hyphenating it, but I never much cared for the name Massie anyway. Frankly, I was glad to have an excuse to ditch my last name when I got married.”

“Well, I’m not Miriam Feyn any more, either. I tried, but after a while, it was just too much trouble to keep telling people my last name was Feyn and not Loewe. Finally gave up when my daughter started kindergarten. Her teacher kept calling me ‘Mrs. Loewe,’ and seemed to resent it when I tried to correct her.”

Vera smiled. “You have a daughter.”

“A son, too.” Miriam glanced toward the Canal. The traffic had been heavy only a few moments ago. Now the broad waterway was quieter and even emptier than it had been at dawn, when she had looked out from her window to see shards of golden light dancing on the still green water. “I remember when you used to say you’d live here and have a gondolier as a lover.”

“Yeah, and that I was going to live in a palazzo. Afraid I didn’t manage either the palazzo or the gondolier.”

Miriam could see her hotel room window from here. She lifted her head, thinking she had seen Alan looking outside. She noticed then that the vendors in the open area did not seem to be doing much business; the knots of tourists buying marionettes, postcards, and maps had disappeared.

“I didn’t manage much of anything,” Miriam said. “I’m a claims manager for an insurance company, and my husband’s a builder and contractor—he owns his own business. He’s in our room, calling his lawyer,

and he won't tell me what that's about, so it probably means he's doing even worse than I think he is. My daughter dropped out of college to live with a guy named Rich who wears his hair in dreadlocks and works at Burger King while he's waiting for his band to make it. My son's out at Hazelden going through his second thirty-day program for substance problems." She wondered why she had told her old friend all of that. Maybe it was because of all the times Vera had nursed her through her black moods in college, finally convincing her that things weren't as bleak as they seemed.

"What do you think of this guy your daughter's with?" Vera asked.

Miriam thought of Rich's gentle brown eyes. "Oh, in some ways, he's not so bad. He's reasonably mannerly, and he seems to care about Joelle. I just wish he were more ambitious, and those dreadlocks—" She sighed. "God, I sound just like my mother when she met Alan. She used to say he'd be so nice-looking if he just did something about his hair."

"And your daughter? What are her plans?"

"I don't really know. Right now, she's doing some sort of free-lance computer stuff, graphic design and such. I don't really understand it that well, but she gets paid for it, however modestly."

Vera said, "Things could be a lot worse, then."

"I suppose." Miriam leaned back in her seat. "I just hope she doesn't get pregnant. She'd probably go ahead and have the baby, even if Rich bailed out. That does seem to be the style nowadays."

"Maybe he wouldn't bail out," Vera murmured.

Maybe he wouldn't, Miriam thought. She already felt a bit more kindly toward Rich. "Actually, I'm more worried about Jason. He had everything going for him, a fellowship at Stanford and a wonderful fiancée, and he threw it all away. Let me reword that. He snorted and freebased it away. I think he might have died if a friend of his hadn't gotten him into detox."

"What happened then?" Vera asked.

"He came home. Promised he'd stay clean. Alan found him an apartment near us and gave him a part-time job. Within a couple of months, he was out scoring again. I found out after he stole some of our silver to pay for the drugs."

"What did you do?" Vera asked.

"Alan was so pissed off he was ready to call the cops. Before he could, Jason came over, really wrecked, and said he was sorry, that he knew he was out of control, and that he had to go back into treatment."

Vera rested one arm on the table. "Then your son was acknowledging his problem. That's a good sign, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. He flew east to Minnesota a week before we left for Italy. Alan refused to cancel our trip. He figured we were better off taking the opportunity to travel while Jason was safely in Hazelden. God knows how we're going to pay for everything when we get home. We'll probably be paying off this trip alone for years, assuming we don't go bankrupt first."

“At least you'll have had it,” Vera said.

“Oh, yes.” Miriam could not keep the bitterness out of her voice. “We'll remember it every time the Visa bill arrives. And there'll still be a lot of sights we'll miss, because there just isn't the time to see everything.”

“You know what I always say?” Vera lifted her arms and pulled her long hair back from her face with both hands, exactly as she used to do in college. “You shouldn't try to see and do everything, no matter how much time you have. You should always leave something for when you come back again.”

Miriam's mouth twisted. “What if you know you'll never come back?”

“You shouldn't look at it that way, Miri. It used to help me when I'd tell myself that I'd come back to do something I hadn't done, that I'd left unfinished, even if I knew the chances were against it. What did I have to lose by hoping?”

Miriam shook her head. “That's the worst thing about getting older, losing hope. I used to think it was other things, getting creaky and arthritic and gray and just not having your physical and mental shit together the way you did when you were younger, but it isn't. It's knowing that nothing's ever going to get any better, that you're just going to drag yourself through life until you finally cash in your chips, that all the things you hoped might happen aren't ever going to happen and that your whole life was probably for nothing. Hell, I'm almost fifty years old, and what have I got to show for it? No wonder Jason and Joelle are so confused. Why should they look forward to anything when they see their parents going down the tubes?”

“Are you going down the tubes?” Vera asked.

“Alan won't talk about his business. He used to discuss it all the time with me. All we do now is worry about money and wonder month to month how we're going to get by—we're in so much debt now that everything could cave in on us tomorrow. I keep waiting for him to say he wants a divorce, even though we can't really afford one. We're not good for each other any more. We'd probably both be better off alone.”

Vera had opened something inside her. Miriam could not stop talking. She spoke of the constant financial pressures of the business and their children, pressures so overwhelming that she and Alan rarely talked of much else. She spoke of how they tore at each other, of how their friends were starting, very surreptitiously, to avoid seeing them quite as often, of the times she and Alan had gone out and their bitterness had pushed them into angry arguments and public scenes, of how horrified she was at some of the things she said to him even when she could not stop saying them.

“Oh, Miri,” Vera said. “Don't you understand? That's why I'm here, to help you.”

Miriam swallowed, struggling to control herself. She must have been unloading on her old friend for a good half-hour at least. She peered at her watch; it had been only a little after eight when she left the hotel. Now it was barely eight-ten. The Grand Canal was still empty of boat traffic, the nearest arched bridge abandoned by the tourist hordes. A gondola was tied up across the way, the gondolier resting against his long pole, so still he did not seem to be breathing. She could almost believe that she and her friend were alone in the sinking city.

Perhaps she was having a nervous breakdown. She had felt on the verge of one for quite a while. She turned toward the booths selling souvenirs, but saw no vendors there. She was imagining it, that everyone

in Venice had vanished in the way she wished that her troubles would.

Vera was sitting with her left ankle resting on her right knee, the way she had when they used to sit around in the Student Union. Strange, Miriam thought, that Vera should look so much as she would have expected her to look, older but basically unchanged. Vera would not have cut her hair as Miriam had and colored it to hide the gray, or put on a blazer and a pair of tailored slacks with an elastic waistband because she was too old and carried a few too many pounds to wear jeans.

“Miri,” Vera said, “you loved your husband once, didn't you?”

“More than anything. We weren't just lovers, we were pals, best friends. He'd get so annoyed when he had to work late. I'd put the kids to bed and have supper with him, even if it was ten-thirty at night, just so we'd have that time together.”

“Miri, he needs you. You need him, too. Don't let a bunch of bullshit get in your way.”

“That's exactly the way you used to put it whenever I got depressed.” She had been going on and on about herself, never even asking Vera about her life. All she knew was that her old friend had married a man with the last name of Langella. She suddenly remembered the pale-haired woman she had glimpsed the night before, from the gondola.

“That was you,” Miriam said, “last night, in one of the houses along that side canal. Everything stopped, and I thought I was going to get a migraine, and then I saw you.”

Vera was on her feet. She seemed translucent, as though she were an image about to flicker out. “I have to go.”

“I'm imagining you. I really am going crazy.” Miriam could see the row of flowers behind Vera through her friend's hazy form. “I dreamed you up, and now you're fading away.”

“Go to your husband. I'll see you later, I promise.”

Before Miriam could speak, voices around her rose in a roar. Crowds were thronging past the nearby kiosks. Miriam gripped the edge of the table, suddenly disoriented as she looked around her. There was a crowd on the nearest arched bridge, and people were milling around in front of the train station and waiting near the docks for the vaporetto. The pathways on either side of the canal had rapidly filled with strollers.

When Miriam turned back, the chair across from her was empty; Vera was gone. She squinted, but could not see Vera's red T-shirt anywhere among the crowds.

* * * *

Alan said nothing about his call to Bernie as they left the hotel. She could not tell him about Vera, about the long-lost friend who had appeared out of nowhere and disappeared just as mysteriously, who could apparently block out sound and make everyone in Venice disappear from view. He would tell her that she was going nuts and then accuse her of trying to drive him crazy. It was almost a relief to think that she might be cracking up. Having a breakdown might be the only escape from her problems that she could manage.

Miriam studied the map of vaporetto routes and discovered that both lines 1 and 2 would take them along the Grand Canal to the docks near Saint Mark's Square. “Line 1 is the local,” she explained.

“Let's take it anyway,” Alan said. “No need to rush.”

They bought their tickets and boarded the passenger boat at the docks by the train station, managing to slip through the knots of passengers and get seats in the prow. Alan seemed content to enjoy the view as the vaporetto made its slow progress along the Canal, crossing from side to side and backing water as it made its stops. By the time they reached the Rialto, Alan was smiling as he watched people bargaining over the prices of flowers, fruits, and fish in the open-air markets near the high arched bridge. Maybe, Miriam thought, Bernie had given him some good news for a change.

He was still smiling as they walked from the landing toward the Piazza San Marco, taking her arm as they entered the huge open square. Mobs of tourists were already swarming through the square as hundreds of pigeons swooped above them; Miriam ducked as one bird barely missed flying into her. Alan consulted his map to get them through the narrow streets and over a small bridge to the glass showroom. She had been prepared to resist the salespeople there, but Alan ended up buying earrings for Joelle, a necklace of glass beads for her, and arranging for the shipment of a ridiculously expensive hand-blown glass sculpture of two long-necked birds that Miriam had admired.

“You certainly turned into a spendthrift,” she whispered as they made their way past a group of Japanese tourists just entering the showroom. “Exactly where are we going to put that sculpture anyway?”

“We'll find a spot. Call it an investment. If things get tough, I can probably sell it for more than I paid.”

His good mood held throughout the tour inside the Basilica San Marco and during their lunch, which they ate at an outdoor table at an overpriced restaurant in Saint Mark's Square. They exchanged vacuous but pleasant commonplaces about the beauty of the Basilica San Marco and reminisced about all the art they had seen in Florence and the Vatican Museums. Alan lit her cigarette with a flourish after the meal and then lighted one for himself.

He abruptly fell silent, then slumped over the table with a sigh. When he sat up again, his face was sallow under his tan. “Are you all right?” Miriam asked.

“Just some indigestion,” he muttered, crushing out his cigarette. “Miri, what would you say if I gave up the business, had Darrell buy me out?”

“What?”

“That's one option. I could subcontract with him, so I wouldn't actually be quitting. He probably couldn't do it, though—he's about as short of money as we are.” He pulled his pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, then put them back without lighting one. “I could try selling to someone else, but there probably wouldn't be any takers, or else I'd have to take too big a loss. I might be able to get another loan, but a lot of that'd have to go toward what's coming due now. Or there's always Chapter 11. All I know is I can't go on the way I've been going.”

He was giving up. That was what he was telling her now. He was saying that he was no longer willing to hang on until times got better because he no longer believed that they would get better. They would be cutting back and living from month to month and trying to fend off disaster until they had nothing left.

He said, “I haven't decided anything yet. We're still discussing the options.”

“Why the hell did you buy that glass sculpture, then?” she said before she could stop herself. “Why the hell did you pile up even more debt for this trip?”

“Because, at this point, a few thousand lousy bucks isn't going to put us much deeper into the hole.” His expression softened. “It's not just that, Miri. I wanted to give you something now, while I still could.” Alan got up slowly. “Finish your coffee. I have to go change some more money.”

“Don't change too much money,” she said. “You might just be tempted to spend even more if you do.”

He walked away. The only reason he had been pleasant up to now was so that he could spring his news on her, his talk about his options, his admission that he had failed. Miriam stirred her coffee, feeling rage and remorse.

* * * *

From the Bridge of Sighs in the Doge's Palace, Miriam peered through the grill at the harbor. On the isle across that lagoon, she could see a church of red brick and marble, a false promise of sanctuary. The Bridge of Sighs, she had read in her guide, had been named for the prisoners who sighed as they were led across it to the Doge's prisons, knowing that this would be their last glimpse of the lagoon. It would probably be close to her last glimpse of the harbor as well, since they would have only two more days in Venice.

The enclosed bridge led them to a dark and bare stone room. A group of Japanese tourists were there, taking photos of one another. She followed Alan back across the bridge. “What an ostentatious display of wealth,” she said as they made their way through an ornate hallway to an exit. “And those paintings! They're gorgeous, but my God. ‘Doge So-and-So Worships the Virgin Mary.’ ‘Doge So-and-So Accepts the Tribute of Venice's Subject Cities.’ ‘Doge So-and-So and His Son Adoring the Holy Eucharist’ and looking mighty damned full of themselves as they do. All they needed was ‘Doge So-and-So Kicks Some Serious Butt’ and ‘Venice Accepts the Tribute of the Universe.’”

Alan usually chuckled at her witticisms, even when they were not particularly funny. As long as they were cracking jokes or making ironic remarks, they would not be fighting. Alan was not smiling; he did not even seem to be listening.

“What time is it?” he asked as they went outside.

Miriam glanced at her watch. “Almost four.”

“I'm not feeling too well, Miri. Maybe I'll head back to the hotel.”

“Oh.” She repressed the comments rising to her lips about how it had been his idea for them to take this trip and now he wasn't even making the most of it and that he could have taken a nap at home for free. “What are your symptoms?”

“I think lunch really disagreed with me.” He stepped closer to her. “Isn't anything important. I just need to rest. Wander around some more if you want—you can come back when it's time to get dressed for dinner. Reservation's not until nine.” His brown eyes looked watery and bloodshot. His voice sounded as though he was pleading with her.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I'll meet you later.”

He made his way through the crowds on the walkway, passed a row of gondolas, and moved toward

the vaporetto dock and ticket booths. Miriam wandered back toward Saint Mark's, wondering what to do now. She could walk along the Grand Canal to the Rialto and do some window-shopping there. She could have ridden as far as the Rialto with Alan, but was afraid they would have been lashing at each other again before they got that far.

“Miri.”

Miriam lifted her head. Vera was coming toward her, still in her T-shirt and jeans. “I told you I'd see you again.” Vera reached out to take her hands.

“Vera.” Miriam clasped her friend's hands tightly. This woman could not be an apparition; she was here, as solid as Miriam herself. “We've been sightseeing.” She was determined this time not to let Vera see her distress. “We did Saint Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace.” She would have to make excuses for her husband's absence. “Alan went back to our room. He has indigestion from lunch. I hope you get to meet him eventually.” Her voice had risen slightly.

“Then you have some time,” Vera said.

“Oh, I have a lot of time. If Alan isn't feeling well enough to have dinner, I guess I'll have even more time.”

Vera slipped her arm through Miriam's. “Why don't you come with me?”

“Come with you where?”

“You'll see.”

They walked toward the landing. For a place that had been swarming with people only a few moments ago, the walkway along the harbor was surprisingly empty. Out in the harbor, two large cabin cruisers were embedded in the water, brought to a stop by the waves that had seemingly stiffened around their hulls. It was happening to her again, the disorienting and yet welcome sensation that time had stopped and that she and Vera were somehow apart from the rest of the world.

“What's happening?” Miriam asked.

“You must know. I've come to help you. I'm your friend, Miri, and you need me now.” Vera gestured at a shiny black motorboat. “Get in. Thought you might like to see the outlying islands. You can get there on the vaporetto lines, but this'll be easier.”

Miriam hesitated, then climbed into the boat. Vera got in next to her and sat down in front of the steering wheel. The motor began puttering almost instantly, as if the boat were starting itself.

Vera took them out of the harbor toward a broad canal that ran between islands, slowing down as they reached the open water of the lagoon. The boat slowed still more until it seemed that they were hardly moving at all. Miriam looked back. Venice was a pastel city adrift on a gold-flecked sea.

She could not recall seeing the other woman actually start the boat or put any keys into the ignition, although she noticed that a key was there now. Being in a strange place and seeing someone she had never expected to see here had disoriented her. Maybe Vera's home was on one of the other islands. Perhaps Vera was waiting until they were there, in the place where she lived, before she told Miriam about her life and what had brought her to Venice. Miriam clung to those strands of rational explanation

for what was happening to her.

“That's the cemetery,” Vera said, waving toward a distant island on which a church stood. “Some famous people are buried there. You can hear the water lapping at the island when you're among the gravestones. Trouble is, if your survivors don't keep up the payments on your gravesite, they dig you up after fifty years and dump you somewhere else. The Venetians always find ways to make more money.”

“I wish some of that ability would rub off on me,” Miriam said.

“I used to wish the same thing,” Vera said. “I had some pretty desperate times after we graduated from college. Then I ended up with a fair amount of money and found out that having it didn't matter as much as I thought it would.”

“I've been finding out that not having it matters more than I ever imagined.”

Vera had slowed their boat nearly to a crawl, following the darker blue waters of a channel through the green lagoon. In the distance, a fisherman with a net was standing to his knees in water next to his boat.

“Water seems awfully shallow,” Miriam said.

“Most of the lagoon's like that. All the boats have to take certain routes to keep from running aground, and they have to go slowly, too. That's partly because the water isn't deep, but it's also to keep from damaging sea walls like that one with a lot of waves from boats going too fast.” Vera pointed at a long stone wall bordering the church on another distant island. Miriam wondered why this nautical traffic was nowhere in evidence now. No other boats were on the water except theirs, no cruisers, no vaporetta.

“I should have kept up with you, Miri,” Vera went on. “I could have at least written to you.”

“I sent a wedding invitation to your parents and told them to forward it to you.”

Vera smiled. “They did, and I actually thought of going. But I couldn't afford the plane ticket, and I hadn't seen you for almost three years and—well, I figured a lot had changed.”

“You probably couldn't believe I'd gotten so conventional,” Miriam said.

“That was part of it, I guess. I was going to write you a letter, but I tore it up halfway through. My life wasn't exactly in order back then. Then I thought, well, there's plenty of time, I can always get in touch later.”

Ahead lay an island of brightly painted houses, long drab buildings that looked like factories, and a precipitously leaning belltower. “I drifted for a while,” Vera continued. “I'd get a job and tell myself I'd work on my art in my spare time. Of course I never did. I've been a receptionist, a nursery school teacher, a case worker, a proofreader, and a few other things. I lived with a guy and we broke up, and then I lived with somebody else, and that ended, too. Basically I was just waiting for my real life to begin, or maybe just waiting to grow up.”

“Were you unhappy?” Miriam asked.

Vera shook her head. “No, but I was frustrated. The whole excuse for living that way was to get my painting done, and I wasn't doing it. I had to keep pretending I would, because otherwise it was just a wasted life, really.”

They had passed the island with the leaning belltower. The light was fading, and Miriam wondered how close they were to their destination.

“Then a lot of things happened.” Vera rested one hand across the wheel. “My father died, and I lost my job, the one I had then, and—well, to make a long story short, I started doing freelance commercial work and using my free time for painting and taking classes. I wasn't exactly a great success, but I was happy. Had my first show in a local bank.” She wrinkled her nose. “It was a start. Then I won a prize in a local art show. That's where I met Al, my husband.”

“Sounds romantic,” Miriam said.

“He'd wandered into the art show by mistake on his way to a Chamber of Commerce thing in the same building.” Vera shook back her long gray hair. “We got married almost eight years ago. I've been really happy with him. We tried for kids, but I couldn't have them, and at least we had each other. Never set the art world on fire, but I did a couple of shows in New York galleries and got part-time gigs in the local schools and community college. I got some critical attention. I could always hope—” Her voice trailed off.

Ahead of their boat stretched empty water, still and gray, and the sun had taken on a strange metallic glow. In the distance, an indistinct dark shape sat on the horizon. Miriam glanced at the other woman apprehensively. It suddenly seemed the height of recklessness to have gotten into this boat with Vera, to have come this far out on the lagoon.

“Al sold his business a few months back,” Vera murmured. “Our plan was to go to all the places we always wanted to see and never had, Venice and Paris and Istanbul and so on. The deal was this—we'd stay in one place until we felt like moving on, and then we'd go to the next city. Venice was the first stop.”

Miriam said, “So everything worked out.”

“You could put it that way.” Vera turned toward her and rested one hand on Miriam's arm. “I've had some happiness.”

“And how long do you think you'll be here?”

Vera drew away. Miriam saw now that they were approaching an island. A church of russet-colored brick sat just above a low sea wall; beyond the church were clusters of houses painted green and red and purple and yellow. The landing was a long wooden dock, but no boats were tied up there.

“Where are we?” Miriam asked. Vera did not reply. Miriam thought of pulling her guide and maps from her purse to check on the location, then peered at her watch. Four-fifteen, which was impossible; they had left the pier just below Saint Mark's not long past four. Miriam squinted and saw that the hand marking the seconds had stopped.

“Damn this watch,” she muttered. “It just died on me. Battery must be defective. I just had it replaced before we left home.”

Vera said, “I should have written to you. I should have been a better friend than I was. You could have used a really good friend, I think, someone to help you treasure what you have, keep you from tormenting yourself.” She steered the boat smoothly through the water to the dock. “Go ahead. I'll tie up

the boat and follow you. That path there will take you to the square.”

Miriam climbed out of the boat. Darkness had come, even though it could not be that late; the shadows were deep under the broad-limbed trees that stood along the cobblestoned footpath. She followed the path up the gently sloping hill until she glimpsed the empty space of a town square above. She picked up her pace, and the silence seemed to thicken around her.

She entered the square. A church of pale stone stood in one corner; three-storey houses with shuttered windows surrounded the square on three sides. A tiered fountain in which no water was running stood in the center of the square near a flagpole without a flag. There were no signs of people, no signs of life.

“Vera,” she said, and the air seemed to swallow the word. “Vera!” The emptiness of the place frightened her. “Vera!” She looked around frantically for the other woman. Why had her friend brought her here? She ran toward the church, wondering if she might find people there.

“Miri!” Someone was calling her, someone at a distance. “Miri!” She recognized the voice now.

She hurried toward the voice, out of the square and past a long row of houses. Alan was standing near a narrow canal; he held out his arms as she rushed to him.

“Miri.” He pressed her to him; she hugged him tightly, feeling suddenly that she had to cling to him, then looked into his face.

“What are you doing here?” she gasped. “How did you get here?”

He smiled, the way he used to before his not-quite-smile had become a habit. “I’m here now. Can’t you just accept that?”

Vera had arranged this. That was the only rational explanation. She and Alan had planned this in secret and he had pretended he wasn’t feeling well so that he could get to this island ahead of her. She could not be imagining it; he was here, solid and real. “You should have told me,” she said. “You didn’t have to—”

He took her arm. They strolled along the canal, past the few gondolas tied up there; she had not known that there were gondolas on these outlying islands. “Vera certainly fooled me,” Miriam murmured. “I never would have guessed. How did you plot all this? When you went to change money, I’ll bet. Did you know Vera was living in Venice all along?” He said nothing. “You saw her, too. You’ve met her. She talked you into coming here and surprising me. That means I’m not going crazy after all.”

Alan slowed his pace. “I haven’t been treating you well lately,” he said. “I wanted this trip to be something special for us, sort of a new start. Or, if things don’t work out businesswise, something we can remember.”

She clutched his arm more tightly. He had on his favorite dark blue cashmere sweater over his shirt. She did not recall seeing him pack the pullover, or the navy blue slacks he was wearing, either. They had both decided on his pin-striped suit, his white dinner jacket and black slacks for evening wear, and brown, beige, and tan jackets and pants for the rest of the time. She remembered the details because they had ended up arguing even over the clothes he would take, and he had insisted on throwing in two pairs of jeans at the last minute.

“Footloose and fancy free,” he went on. “That’s what I figured on for myself. Never thought I’d seriously consider getting married until I met you, and then I knew I just didn’t want to go through the rest of my

life without you. Knew that two hours after I met you.”

“Two hours?” Miriam smiled. “I thought it took you two days to fall in love with me.”

“I told you it took me two days because I didn't want you thinking I was too rash, or rushed into things. That's why I waited a week before proposing, too.”

He had waited barely a week. She had insisted on living with him for a while first, to make sure they were truly compatible and things would work out, and it had not even occurred to her that moving in with a man she had known for only a week might be precipitous. They had been married six months later, and she had felt no qualms about that, either, despite her mother's doubts about Alan's new business and her friends at work who felt that marriage was an outmoded institution. They had to be doing the right thing. Otherwise, they would not be feeling so much for each other, would not have made the decision to share their lives so quickly.

Often she had thought of her early self as naive and deluded and too trusting. Now she felt as though she had seen things clearly then, and that her vision had become more clouded and blurred with the years.

“We were happy then,” she said. “Even with all the problems—”

“And then the kids came—”

“And then I was so damned exhausted all the time that there wasn't time to think about whether I was happy or not.” Joelle had inherited her father's lanky frame and his dark hair, while Jason had Miriam's blue eyes and own her father's broad, pleasant face. Everyone had always complimented her on her good-looking children.

“We had some good times,” Alan said. “I think I appreciated them more later, when I'd be remembering them, than when they were actually happening.”

He led her away from the canal toward a narrow passageway that ran between buildings. The doors were closed, the windows shuttered or their curtains drawn. She wanted to ask Alan how he had gotten here, why no one was on this island, why Vera had gone to all that trouble to get her to this deserted place, and then she gazed into his composed, serene face and forgot her questions.

A door was suddenly flung open. Miriam stepped back, drawing closer to Alan. She gazed into a small sitting room, where a young man sat at a table; the pretty young woman by the door giggled.

“Buona sera,” Alan murmured.

“Buona sera,” the young woman replied. She was wearing a long red dress and holding a mask in one hand. She lifted the mask to her face and tilted her head.

Miriam could now hear the sound of voices. At the end of the passageway, they came to a broad cobblestoned street and found it filling with people. Couples, a few in masks, strolled arm in arm and stopped to peer into brightly lighted shop windows. The younger women were in colorful long dresses, the older ones in subdued shades of purple and dark blue. Most of the men were in black pants and loose white shirts with full sleeves. They had to be locals; no one was wearing the tourist costume of jeans, T-shirts, and athletic shoes. Perhaps this was some obscure Venetian festival the travel agent and guide books had neglected to mention.

They stopped by one shop window. Behind the panes, two terra cotta marionettes danced. The male marionette took the hand of the female puppet and bowed. A dark-haired young woman was manipulating the strings; she caught Miriam's eye and smiled.

Evening had come. People were sitting at outdoor tables and wandering inside restaurants while others laughingly disappeared into alleys. Alan stopped at a display of lace outside one shop, fingered the delicate work of one shawl, then draped it over Miriam's shoulders.

She shook her head. "It's beautiful, but it'll cost too much."

A slender blonde woman had come out of the shop. "Quanto?" Alan asked. She answered him in Italian, he murmured something else, and Miriam saw their hands touch for a moment.

"It's a gift," Alan said as he took Miriam's arm again. Before she could speak, he had led her toward a small table outside one of the restaurants.

The waiter brought them glasses of a sparkling wine, and then a white wine with an unfamiliar label. Miriam let Alan order the food. They nibbled at mushroom tarts, bean soup with pasta, and calamari. The wine was making Miriam lightheaded. She laughed as Alan spoke of the early days of their marriage, of the years in their cramped apartment and first house before they had moved into the one he had built for them. Memories were spilling out of her, too—Jason's valedictorian's speech to his high school class, Joelle's home run for the girls' softball team during the state championship game, the morning during their trip to Cancun when they had sent the kids down to the beach, locked the door, and made love until lunchtime.

Their waiter brought them a concoction of chocolate, cream cheese, and cake for dessert. Alan stirred his coffee. "I used to tell you then," he said, "that we'd look back on those years with some fondness, even the rough times."

"Yeah." Miriam leaned toward him. "Funny—I don't even remember how panicky I got when I was trying to get a job and couldn't find one. You remember, after Joelle was in nursery school. Took me three months, and we had to keep holding off the bill collectors, and all I really remember now is how ecstatic I was when Freedom Mutual hired me."

"I kept looking forward," Alan said. "That's what kept me going—that and you. I think I could handle things now if things were right between us. I could face anything then."

Her head was clearing. She suddenly wondered where Vera was. Vera had wanted to leave them alone, to settle things between them, to have a romantic evening on this little island. Why? What did Vera want with them? Why had she gone to all this trouble for a friend she had not seen for years until today?

Alan got up. He was quickly at her side, helping her out of her chair. She did not see if he had left any money for the waiter as he led her along the street. The shops were closing; women were carrying displays of lace, glass, and marionettes inside and locking the doors. The tables outside the restaurants had been abandoned.

Along the canal where Alan had been waiting for her, gondolas were gliding silently toward the open water. Her hand rose to her neck and she realized that she must have left the lace shawl at their table. "We'd better go back. I forgot that beautiful shawl."

"It was a gift, Miri."

“Just because you didn't have to pay for it—”

“You can't take anything away from here. They won't let you.”

“Are we going to Vera's house?” Miriam asked. He did not reply. “Does she live here, on this island? How did you get here, anyway?”

“Miri,” he whispered, “I need you. Don't leave me,” and let go of her arm. She reached for him and clutched air. She spun around; he had disappeared.

“Alan!” she cried out. “Alan!” She hurried along the canal, not seeing him anywhere in the darkness, then ran toward the square. “Alan! Alan!” She kept calling his name until tears filled her eyes.

Lights were going on in the houses around the square. She looked up at the nearest windows and saw people gazing down at her. The square looked smaller, the buildings around it shabbier. The flagpole, painted red, was still there; the fountain had disappeared.

Two men were coming toward her, one in a dark blue uniform, the other in a striped shirt and loose dark pants. “Signora,” the man in the striped shirt said.

“Mio sposo,” she said frantically. “Signor Loewe.” She did not know enough Italian to make herself understood. “Help me, please. Per favore. My husband—” She paused. “Where am I?”

“You do not know, Signora?” the man in uniform said.

Miriam struggled to control herself. “Vera Langella,” she said. “She's the woman who brought me here. Where does she live?”

The uniformed man shook his head and thrust out his hands. “I do not know the name.”

A joke. It was all a cruel joke. Vera had thought it up and talked Alan into playing along. All the tender words had been only another bitter jest. Maybe these men were in on it, too, and if they weren't, they might assume she was demented if she went on and on about her husband and her friend. She would not go along with this horrible joke any longer.

“How do I get back to Venice?” she asked.

The man in uniform pointed in the direction of the landing. “The vaporetto,” he replied.

She hurried down the slope. Vera's boat had vanished. Out on the water, she could see the lighted decks of an approaching vaporetto.

* * * *

The boat took her to another island. She looked at her watch, which was running again, telling her that it was only seven o'clock. She consulted her schedule, questioned the people waiting on the landing with her, and found out that she was on the island of Murano and that the number 5 would get her back to Venice itself. That water bus took her to an unfamiliar landing. An older woman who spoke English pointed her in the direction of the Grand Canal.

She walked there and caught a vaporetto to the landing near the hotel. The boat traffic was as heavy as

it had been during the day, and it seemed that flotillas of gondoliers were ferrying passengers along the Grand Canal. People were still roaming the streets, loading up on souvenirs, or finishing coffee and wine at outside tables.

As she came into the lobby, the desk clerk looked up, and then a man in a dark suit was bearing down on her from the left. "Mrs. Loewe." He bent forward from the waist, then took her hand. "They came for your husband."

Miriam tensed. "Who?"

"They took him, the ambulance. He is in l'ospedale, the hospital. He was in the lobby, and then he fell—" Miriam hung on to him tightly. "He came to the desk. I heard him say this word, something like 'Miri,' and then he fell."

* * * *

The hotel manager walked her down to the docks. A powerboat was there, one much like the boat Vera and she had been in that afternoon. The hospital looked like a Renaissance palazzo from the outside. Inside, stretchers were lined against the walls and white-jacketed men, nurses, and nuns moved swiftly through the corridors. As she followed the orderly who had met her at the entrance, Miriam heard the sound of electronic beeps and then a voice over the public address system summoning a physician.

A console beeped next to Alan; an intravenous needle was in his arm and wires ran from his body to the console. A man, apparently asleep, lay on a bed next to Alan's; he was also hooked up to a console. The other two beds were empty; a small marble statue of the Virgin Mary stood at the other end of the room. She lifted a hand to her mouth.

"Signora Loewe." A man in a physician's white coat came toward her. "It will be all right." He squinted at her through wire-rimmed glasses; he seemed young, maybe still in his twenties, with light brown hair and a closely trimmed beard. "Your husband was lucky. He was brought here immediately. It is a myocardial—" He paused. "A heart attack, but he will recover."

She leaned over her husband and touched his hand. Alan opened his eyes. "Miri."

"You'll be all right. The doctor just said so."

"Went to the lobby. I don't know why, I was thinking—" His throat moved as he swallowed. "I was thinking about you. Thought of going over to the vaporetto landing, to meet you, tell you I was sorry—I was dreaming about you. We were walking around in—I think it was some kind of village. Wanted to stay there, and knew I couldn't. I needed you, I was trying to hang on—"

"It's all right." She moved her hand gently over his. "I can't lose you, Alan. I love you."

His mouth curved up; he was smiling, as he had on the island. "You won't." He closed his eyes.

* * * *

She found the young doctor out in the hallway. He introduced himself as Dr. Palmieri and led her to an alcove with two chairs, a sofa, and a crucifix hanging on the wall. He explained that her husband could be flown home in a week to ten days, that it could have been worse, that if he had been alone in his room instead of in the hotel lobby among people when he collapsed, where help could quickly be summoned for him, he might not have survived.

“He must see a cardiologist when he is home,” Dr. Palmieri said. “It may be he needs more treatment, but I can assure you—”

“Thank you,” Miriam murmured. “Grazie.”

“I am much relieved myself,” the physician said softly. “Only two weeks ago, I was called to tend to another tourist, an American like yourself. That was not so good an outcome. She had cancer—it had spread to her lymph nodes and internal organs. Her husband said she had been afflicted for almost four years. They were traveling on what he called their farewell tour, because they knew—” He looked away for a moment. “She was a strong woman. She would not admit her illness. She said that I had better put her together because she had not been to see the Peggy Guggenheim collection here yet. She was gone that same day. So I am glad this will not also be the case with your husband, Signora.”

Miriam bowed her head. “So am I.” She would not lose Alan. Nothing else seemed to matter at the moment.

“Signora Langella.” Miriam realized that she had expected to hear her friend's name. “Signora Vera Langella. That was what the American woman was called. She was fighting, but when she was finally gone—” Dr. Palmieri let out his breath. “She seemed at peace.”

* * * *

On the day before they were scheduled to fly home, Miriam took the vaporetto to San Michele, the cemetery island she had seen from Vera's boat. Vera had not been buried here; Dr. Palmieri had told her that Vera's husband had taken her body back to the States. But somehow she felt that her friend was here, that she might remain here for a while.

Miriam walked among the tombstones. Other tourists had come, to gather by the graves of Pound and Diaghilev and Stravinsky and the other artists buried here. She stood and listened to the lapping water as she whispered a thank you and a farewell to her friend.

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