

No Change

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Jennifer sensed guilt written all over her face. She clutched the five euro note nervously in her coat pocket. Just in case. Her heart was racing. She knew she'd be asked for a ticket any moment. She was not used to this kind of deception. But there had been such a queue, so she decided to take a chance. Rules so often seem easier to break when you're abroad. And somehow she managed to slip on and off the boat without anyone noticing. And the moment she stepped off the vaporetto at *Alilunga*, she sensed her pulse return instantly to normal.

The light was fading rapidly. She was happy to be back in Venice after all these years. Despite the sadness. Despite the cold. Or maybe because of the cold. It seemed the right place to be.

The last time Jennifer had been here was over ten years ago. Under very different circumstances. Wide-eyed with love and flushed with the honeymoon glow of her first few days as David's wife, she had hardly noticed the heaving crowds and sweltering heat of mid-summer. Her love for David was perfect and complete. Her rapture total. And she embraced it with her entire being.

But today she was here to escape. And Venice seemed the only place where she felt able to do this. Like a place of exorcism. It was fitting that the city this time, in the dead of winter, was so cold. So empty. So lost. As if it knew the reason for her coming.

She looked back over her shoulder as she walked up towards St Mark's Square. The vaporetto had already moved off to its next stop at *San Zaccharia*. A light mist was starting to gather on the water behind her. Like hoary wisps of hair it trailed in the wash left by the boat. Lent a strange and forbidding quality to the black gondolas that were tied up by the water's edge. There was a disturbing malice in the way they bobbed up and down, competing with the campanile of the *San Giorgio Maggiore* that rose through the mist behind them. But it was much too far away and could offer no competition. The gondolas won hands down.

Just behind them, a stray craft moved silently through the water where the vaporetto had just been. The black S-shape of its bow drooped like a heavy teardrop frozen as it hit the water. At its helm a rather grumpy-looking gondolier. And inside, nestling beneath a heavy blanket, a young couple, trying to keep warm as they slid towards the Grand Canal. There was a blue shiver in their cheeks, and their warm breath formed instant clouds of condensation as they talked. The scene was in such contrast to the sparkling warmth of the ride she recalled with David all those years ago. That had been sheer bliss, encapsulated in the warm twinkle of his dark brown eyes when he smiled. For these two lovers, the ride was a trial, deep-frozen into their faces. Perhaps this was the secret. Perhaps it was the very bliss which Jennifer had known that had fed her with all those fanciful expectations. *These* two young lovers plainly had no presumptions.

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Their ride was obviously a trial from the outset. And maybe this is what it takes, thought Jennifer. Certainly the expectations she and David had had of their life together could never possibly have been fulfilled. Too rosy was her view. Too business-like his.

As these thoughts washed through Jennifer's mind, the gondolas by the water's edge continued their bobbing up and down. She had the distinct impression they were playing there especially for her. The elegant S-shape of their black bows, each adorned with a glinting metal ferro, seemed to carry a message. A cryptic clue. The repeated bobbing of these esses a gentle warning. For her. For her alone.

But Jennifer paid no attention to their signals. She turned towards the piazza. And passing around the corner of the Basilica, she let her gaze wander up the looming campanile of St Marks as she went. So vast. Like a huge exclamation mark. And Jennifer the dot at the bottom.

She barely noticed the scaffolding and wooden planks at first. They had been erected around the piazza as a walkway for when the square was under water. Although it was not actually flooded at the time, the few people who were in the square today evidently felt obliged to use it. And it was the sound of their footsteps – the beating of wood against steel poles – that caught Jennifer's attention. Their sound echoed around the square in a way that made the place seem even emptier and more desolate than it already was.

And it irritated her. She had no intention of joining them on the wooden planks. She was making for the *Ala Napoleonica* on the other side. And could see no reason for not taking the direct route. Straight across the square.

Except for what looked like the occasional pool of water, the piazza was perfectly dry. Yet no one was inclined to venture onto the square itself. No one except Jennifer and an elderly-looking tramp, who was feeding the pigeons with a few scraps of bread. She had not noticed him at first. It was only when she was halfway across the piazza, and her attention was caught by a flurry of pigeons, that she saw the swing of his arm. Just for an instant. The pigeons settled around a large crust which he had thrown them and which landed just a few feet away to her right. The birds swooped on the coveted crust. And at that moment Jennifer's feet suddenly and without warning gave way from under her. She caught a flash of the buildings around the piazza. The campanile. The pinkish-blue sky. Felt the thud.

Then everything went black.

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She came to in an audiovisual fog that only let through the barest fragments of sense. A hand holding her left arm. A jumble of Italian words in her ear. All she could make out was the word *sfortunata*. It kept repeating. Over and over. *Sfortunata, sfortunata, sfortunata*. And every time the sibilant S scraped away a little more of the fog in her mind. But not until she felt the searing pain in the small of her back did she realise instinctively that what she had seen as small pools of water were actually ice. She had slipped.

When her eyes eventually opened to see where these words were coming from, her pain almost instantly vanished. She found herself looking into the most exquisite pair of dark brown eyes she had ever seen. They belonged to a face no less gorgeous in its finely chiselled features, highlighted by a five o'clock shadow and dark crinkly hair that showed just a hint of age and experience in the slight greyness around the temples. The warm twinkle of those eyes suffused and caressed her entire body to such effect that not even the most potent analgesic could have offered such soothing relief. This was David without the business-like downside. In that moment she had found bliss again. Venice-style. She could hardly believe her luck.

As she pushed herself up and tried to regain her feet, she felt another hand supporting her right arm.

“Take it easy, love” came a different voice. An English one this time. Gravelly and smoke-enriched. With a London accent. It was the tramp.

She looked around. Her dark-eyed Adonis was nowhere to be seen. The dreamboat had gone. And the pain had returned with a vengeance – an intense, sharp, vice-like pressure on her tailbone that twisted itself vindictively up into her back.

“Are you all right, love?” It was still there. The gravelly voice. Its words made fuzzy in the coarse and greasy grey matting of his beard as they came out. Jennifer caught the smell of spirit on his breath and nicotine in his thick long hair. It brushed against her cheek as she pulled herself up by the ragged sleeve of his herring-bone overcoat, which had plainly seen better days.

“You’ve taken a nasty knock, love,” it insisted. “Let me take you to your hotel. Are you staying near here?”

All of a sudden Jennifer was seized by a sense of panic. Her handbag! Where was it?

“My bag,” she whispered, still barely able to speak. “Have you seen my bag?”

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“Do you mean this?” the old tramp held out a pink crocodile-skin handbag with a silver chain. There was a smirk on his face that disturbed her.

The shiny new designer bag dangling from the fingers of this seedy figure in his worn-out herring-bone coat made a rather comical picture. But Jennifer was not laughing. She was still too racked by the pain of her fall, and far too troubled by his smirk. She snatched the bag with a curt “Thank you”.

Fearful that something might have been taken, she wanted to open it. But even more anxious that he might just snatch the notes out of the bag – if he had not already done so – she kept it firmly shut.

“Look. I’ll be fine now. Really. My hotel is just around the corner.”

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving you in this state, love. Look at yourself. You need someone to look after you.”

“You’re very kind. But really, I’ll be all right,” she insisted. The man was beginning to irritate her.

“Look, take this for your trouble.” Impatiently she handed him the five euro note from her coat pocket and hoped he’d go away. “It’s all I’ve got.”

It was the first time she had looked the man in the face. And what she saw unnerved her. Through the shroud of his matted grey locks peered two eyes that may well have twinkled once with all the warmth she had seen in the eyes of her Adonis. But it was hard to imagine. There was certainly no trace of a twinkle now. They were like eyes in which the lights had long been switched off. And the coldness which this had left was heightened by the oversized lobe of his left eyelid, which drooped like a bottom-heavy ess. Like a permanent teardrop about to fall.

He was looking at the note that Jennifer held out to him. Through the mass of grey hair there appeared to be an expression of deep hurt engraved on his face. And when he raised his eyes, she saw a glowering look that seemed to come from the darkest realms of the demonic. It danced on a fine line somewhere between wounded pride and the crazed look of one possessed.

He took her arm again. Only tighter this time.

“Come along, love. Where did you say you were staying?”

The words slipped out almost involuntarily: “The Regina”, she said.

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“Perfect. Can you walk all right?” the man replied. And forcefully guided her by the arm over the remaining stretch of the piazza.

Every step she took was agony on her back. But Jennifer did not utter a sound for fear of incurring the tramp’s wrath any further than she plainly already had. The cold streets grew narrower and darker the closer they came to the hotel. And emptier. Until there was no one else in the street but them. Just the two of them. The sound of feet that echoed through the alleyway was theirs and theirs alone.

They were approaching what Jennifer recognised as the final bend into the small courtyard outside the hotel. And before they turned that bend, she could not escape the man’s menacing gaze as he looked down at her. The darkness of the look accentuated by the heavy droop of his eyelid.

She was reminded of the gondolas bobbing up and down in the water. Just before she fell. The dark S shape of their heavy bows. Their indecipherable message.

“Here we are then,” came the gravelly, smoke-enriched voice, “home at last.”

The hirsute old man in the tatty herring-bone overcoat held open the door. And Jennifer’s thoughts evaporated in the luxurious warmth of the lobby.

“Buona sera, dottore,” said the woman at reception as they came in and, without any further prompting, handed the shabby grey-haired stranger his key. Then, almost in the same breath: “Good evening madam. Your room number?”