

## **The Canal of Destiny**

The door to the compartment opened in the darkness and, in the dim light, I was able to make out a brown hand holding a duffle bag. I pushed myself upright against the leather seat and my voice squeaked as I said, “Is this your seat? I thought it was vacant.”

The train continued to rumble past empty fields. I could just make out dark green blobs in rows that must be olive trees. He broke the strained silence.

“It’s a short trip for me, but I’ve worked a twelve hour shift in the hospital so I need to rest. Come. Don’t leave. There is room for both of us on these wide seats.”

I longed to lie down once more, but my mother’s voice nagged at me. *If you’re going to travel on your own in Europe, watch out for strange men.*

“I’m going to Venice to stay with my older brother who owns a restaurant. He’ll be meeting the train in the morning.” I glanced sideways at him in the darkness to see if he was buying my story.

“Okay. Suit yourself, but you’ll be sleeping on the floor in the corridor. There are no seats left.”

He placed his duffle bag onto the overhead rack and sprawled across the two seats to my right. I stayed sitting rigidly upright. My long blond hair was matted from the sweat of several days of living in youth hostels. The legs of my sweatpants were pushed up against the backs of my knees.

“Look, I need some rest, too. I’ll just lie here against the arm rest and you keep to your own side.”

I heard him chuckle to himself as he turned his face toward the door. “Whatever you say, sweet one. I don’t intend you any harm.”

I could soon hear him breathing deeply, right there next to me. The slight smell of male sweat mixed with an expensive aftershave made my body restless. I had a strong urge to run my fingers down the inside of his muscular leg.

My left hip had a dull ache and my cheek was pressed against the arm of the seat when I opened my eyes to see faint sunlight. Pulling myself up to look out the window, I could taste the staleness of my mouth. The man lying next to me was about thirty with a long slender body, deeply tanned olive skin and inky black hair.

He stretched and sat up and glanced over my entire form lingering on my bare legs. “So, you didn’t leave after all.”

I blushed and crossed my legs. “I must look a mess. It’s hard to look glamorous when you are travelling in this heat.”

His eyes continued to explore every crevice of my body. We sat together on the double seat for a few moments leaning against each other. The heat from his body made me drowsy.

Part of me wanted to resist, but the scent of him was overwhelming. He rubbed his hand from the top of my thigh to my knee and back causing my toes to curl.

“I wish that we had met earlier in the trip.” I flicked my eyelashes at him. “Now, you will be gone and I won’t get to know you.”

He pulled me very close, his eyes smouldering with passion. Then he sighed and dropped his hands. “It’s not to be. We’ll soon be at the station. But I’d like to see you again while we’re both in Venice. How about meeting me for coffee or lunch?”

“That would be great.” I stammered. “But, I don’t even know your name.”

“Mine is Adolphe Pomodoro. And you?”

I hesitated studying his face closely. “Josephine Randall. You can call me Josie like my friends do.”

“Well, Josie, I’m in Venice for a weekend break. I’m a doctor and this is one of my few weekends off in the past month.”

She held her breath. Wouldn’t her friends Ann Marie and Kathryn be impressed that she had a sort of date with a doctor? “Like I told you, I’ll be staying with my big brother here.”

I was just starting to relax when the train jerked to a stop. He reached for his bag, and scribbled an address on a slip of paper handing it to me. “I’ve got to go now, but please do meet with me tomorrow. That’s a quiet little place off the Grand Canal.”

I pulled on the straps of my backpack and skipped down the train steps to the platform, giving him a little wave as I headed towards a tall husky blond man. Just as I reached him, I changed direction and took the well-marked path toward the youth hostel. Oh, god, I hope this one has a shower and real soap. I need to look great tomorrow.

I stood gazing down the expanse of the busy canal in the bright sunshine. The water taxis were picking up noisy tourists at every stop. Occasionally, I would see the long sleek black gondolas drift past, piloted by a local dressed in black suit with short pants and stockings and wearing a round red pillbox hat. My palms were sweaty from clenching and unclenching them as I paced. He had said to meet him at eleven and it was

already eleven-thirty. How long should I wait? Was there any use in waiting any longer for a stranger I hardly knew?

As I made my way back to the hostel, loud yelling startled me. Was that a shot from the plaza below? I could feel a knot of panic tightening in the pit of my stomach. A tanned and slender man in white cotton pants was sprinting towards me. Could it be Adolphe? A bearded man was charging behind him and raised the gun once more. This shot sounded closer and made me jump.

As the running man approached, I recognized him and called, “Adolphe. What’s happening?”

He grabbed my arm and pulled my body so that my back was tightly against his chest. “You don’t want to injure an innocent bystander do you?” He snarled at the man rapidly approaching us.

My body was in shock? I began to whimper like a small animal.

He hushed me. “He’s Italian police and won’t shoot you.”

“You said that you were a doctor.”

“I’ll explain later.” He moved us back towards the canal.

I could feel his hot breath on the back of my neck. I was excited and horrified at the same time. “What do you plan to do with me?”

“He has mistaken me for a well known jewel thief. You’re going to help me escape.” We stood at the edge of the canal with a dozen gondolas moored below us.

“I’m not ready to fight off the police for you. I’m not sure that I even want to get to know you any better.” I struggled to break free, but he held me tighter.

Suddenly, my body was falling and I opened my eyes long enough to see the blue grey water of the canal. With a loud thump, we landed in the gondola and Adolphe grabbed the oar and punted us into the middle of the canal. He easily manoeuvred us between crowds of other gondolas heading up the Grand Canal. The policeman stopped at the edge with gun raised. Unable to get a clear shot, he swore and ran down the path following us.

Regaining some confidence, I pulled myself from the floor of the boat, onto the red-carpeted seat and turned to face him. “How could you do this to me? I could be considered a criminal or something. I thought you liked me.”

“My father was a professional gondolier. I have lived in these boats since I was five. I’m not a doctor, but neither am I a jewel thief. I must have carried some bad guy across the canal last night.”

Why should I believe this new story? I studied him carefully, but the blue eyes hid any expression. “I don’t believe you.” I turned to face the front of the boat.

The boat stopped and he joined me on the seat and put his arms around my shoulders. “My sweet thing, Josie, I wish that I could really get to know you. It’s too dangerous, my life, for you. I’ll have to let you go.”

I felt the boat bump against the wharf and another gondolier reached out his hand to help me to shore. Adolphe, threw a kiss into the air in my direction, grabbed the oar and was soon far down the canal. Cold sweat washed over me and my chest was so tight that I could hardly breath, as I struggled across the bridge. Maybe he was a criminal, or maybe it was mistaken identity. All I know is that he was the most exciting man I had ever met. And I’d probably never see him again.