

MR NEWHOUSE'S
PROPOSITION



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CHAPTER 1



Venice was not Sevenoaks. Wreathed in thick winter fog, with nothing visible but the tantalising facades of great buildings and, by the Grand Canal, gondolas and vaporetti creeping in and out of the mist, it was quite unlike anything Francesca Malahide had ever encountered.

The sensible part of her wondered why she'd abandoned the safe, silent privacy of home at all. Only an uncharacteristic moment of impulse had sent her scuttling to the airport that morning, to find a ticket out of chilly England to anywhere really.

Thirty three years old, happily settled in a dental surgery in town, she was a successful, professional woman. The fact there was no man in her life — never had been, it was hard work becoming a dentist — didn't concern her in the slightest. She needed a break, that was all.

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ONE NIGHT away from the incessant false cheeriness of New Year's Eve in England. Then back to normality and peace.

An hour before, she'd checked in at the hotel the airport found her, a tiny place in Dorsoduro with the odd name, Casanova di Casanova. Then stepped out of the front door, turned left, turned right, turned...

She no longer knew where. Francesca was, for the first time in her tightly-ordered adult life, lost. The map she took from Aldo, the kindly man at reception, proved meaningless. There were no street signs, no crossroads or obvious landmarks. Within minutes she'd found herself stumbling through a baffling maze of decaying palazzi, along narrow canals, past shop windows full of frivolous clothes and jewellery that would never do back at home in Sevenoaks.

It was now ten minutes to four. She had just walked to the end of a narrow alley she felt sure she'd gone down before only to find herself staring at a dead end much like all the others: an opaque bank of murk, beneath it a margin of grey water that rippled gently as if a hidden jester was disturbing it for fun.

'Damn,' Francesca said loudly and stamped her shiny sensible shoes.

The long black nose of a gondola appeared out of the mist, turned sideways in front of her then hove gently towards a set of steps which disappeared down into the canal.

A man stood upright by the peaked bows, middle-aged, erect and rather noble. He gave the gondolier some money and stepped daintily onto the pavement.

'You're lost, madame,' he said in good English. 'No worry. This is Venice. Most people are one way or another.'

He wore a long black cloak and was handsome in a striking old-fashioned way. Flowing silver hair, a mobile, almost feminine face, and very bright, alert eyes.

'I'm looking for the hotel Casanova di Casanova,' she said straight out. 'Do you know it?'

'Of course.'

He came and stood next to her, dusting down his cloak.

'My name's Jack Newhouse,' he said. 'I really need a coffee. There's a place near here.'

Coffee. The very idea of a hot cappuccino on a freezing day like this...

'Find me my hotel, Mr Newhouse, and I'm buying.'

'Agreed. Miss...'

'Francesca Malahide,' she volunteered, without quite knowing why.

'What a beautiful name. Do you know?' He laughed. 'That's my hotel too.'

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THEY WENT to a tiny café near the Accademia museum and it was the best cappuccino she'd ever tasted. Then at Jack's suggestion — he would be addressed by his first name only and was the easiest and most agreeable of companions — they walked round to a wide pavement which led to the very tip of Dorsoduro.

Fog horns sounded out of the grey nothingness. Pale spires rose from the bank of cloud that covered the Basin of St Mark. And Jack Newhouse talked of Venice, of artists and musicians, celebrities and scoundrels. Of the prisons where the Doge kept his enemies, the church where Vivaldi's orchestra of orphans used to play, and how Katharine Hepburn once fell into the San Trovaso canal.

'Are you from here, then?' she asked a little later as he held open the door to an elegant bar housed in what seemed to be an old salt warehouse overlooking the water.

'Venice is an imaginary place in all honesty,' he answered

with a wink. 'Since we all have imaginations, there's a little bit of it in all of us. Even you.'

'Well I don't...'

But by then he was shoohing her to a table and ordering what he said was the perfect drink to enjoy on a chill afternoon like this, with the light fading and the salty air of the lagoon seeping through the vast shiny windows.

Spritz. It was a bright red colour, Campari, prosecco, soda water, an olive and a slice of orange.

'This is the drink for Venice,' he advised. 'Anywhere else and it tastes disgusting.'

She tried a sip, reeled at the initial shock, then tried again.

'Well?'

'It's lovely. I wondered...'

He was gesturing at the waiter, speaking Italian with a rapid fluency. Very soon a succession of small plates appeared, cicchetti he called them. Tiny sardines in marinade, anchovies, squid, odd vegetables and salad.

'Francesca, What are your plans for this evening, may I ask? Do you have a gown? Something for the revelries?'

Before she could answer he stared frankly at her face and said, 'I hope you won't wear a mask. You're much too honest and pretty for that nonsense.'

It was the spritz that made her blush, nothing else. She had no plans, of course, and neither did he.

'I go home tomorrow,' she said. 'You?'

'Just flitting through,' he replied a little wistfully.

She liked Jack Newhouse though there was a sad air about him. As if he'd lost something that mattered. She couldn't help but wonder whether his rather static silver hair was a wig too, not that it mattered.

'Where's home?' she inquired.

'A lady who's fond of cicchetti and spritz.' He got to his feet with a broad smile. 'Such fine and adventurous tastes.'

Let me find you something else to try. After that I'll take you back to the Casanova di Casanova. I've stolen enough of your time already. Unless...'

Then he was gone to the counter.

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THEY RETURNED to the hotel where Francesca changed into clothes that, while sensible, were a little more fetching. He was waiting in the street when she came out. Same black coat. Same interesting sad face and immobile silver hair.

'I'm not intruding, am I?' Jack asked.

On the way back he'd shyly offered to show her more of the city if she truly had nothing else to do. It was no struggle to accept.

And so, as evening fell, Francesca found herself striding across the wooden bridge of the Accademia into a city marooned in the mists of the lagoon, as distant and separate as could be from the world to which she herself belonged.

They marvelled at the choir in Vivaldi's church of La Pietà. Drank prosecco as they listened to the cheesy string quartets in the Piazza San Marco, with the summit of the campanile disappearing into the swirling brume above them.

Through streets crowded with revellers in carnival costume Jack led her, talking all the while, of Venice past, a lost and lovely city where anything was briefly possible.

Two more glasses of spritz were consumed in stops along the way, with a couple of prosecco and so many different cicchetti — occasionally of dishes she would never have tried back home — Francesca quite lost count.

By the time they reached the Rialto bridge the fog was clearing. On the white stone parapet she giggled as he leaned over the edge and sang what he said was a bawdy Venetian ditty down to the vaporette stirring from the

jetties below. And then, by the nearby markets, he hired a gondola.

They sat next to one another in the back and glided gently down the Grand Canal, past palazzi and churches, past hotels where masked balls were under way behind vast glittering windows.

'Where are we?' she asked as the long black shape began to edge towards a jetty emerging from the bank.

'In Dorsoduro. Not a minute from the Casanova di Casanova.'

Gently he lifted her cold fingers and kissed them once, very quickly, then smiled.

'Thank you for a beautiful New Year's Eve, Francesca Malahide. I don't know what this lonely soul would have done...'

'Me neither,' she said feeling a touch feverish in spite of the chill.

'One hour to midnight. I fear a pumpkin waits for me somewhere. And then there's the fireworks...'

'Fireworks?'

'Oh.' His sad face lifted. 'The best you'll ever see. All across the Basin of St Mark. Just a few minutes but a memory to last forever.'

For the first time since they'd met he seemed reticent, almost nervous.

'What is it, Jack?'

He edged away from her.

'I don't want to spoil things.'

'How?'

'It's just... my suite. It's at the top of the hotel and very...'
He grinned, shrugged his shoulders. 'Very fetching if I'm honest. There's a view from the windows all the way across to San Marco. Don't misunderstand my intentions, dear Francesca. But on a night like this...'

'Yes,' she said, and took his arm then stepped onto what felt like dry and certain land.

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THERE WAS no one behind the hotel desk. Jack Newhouse led her up the winding stairs, three floors, four, until he found a dead-end corridor that led to a single door in what must have been the eaves.

'This,' he said, 'is mine.'

It was the most beautiful room she'd ever seen. Velvet curtains open to the night which had turned strangely clear beneath a shining moon. An old-fashioned couch was positioned in front of the windows with a view of the entire Basin of St Mark so beautiful it stole away her breath. To the side was a large four-poster bed. Francesca didn't look at it too closely.

'Please,' Jack said, beckoning to the comfy-looking sofa. 'I'll find us a toast.'

He returned with two tiny glasses of grappa which tasted like fireworks itself. And then the show began, pyrotechnics over the city in the lagoon.

'Nothing lasts,' Jack Newhouse said as he sat next to her, quite close. 'We're mayflies, really, but never know it. All we have are a few brief moments. Of passion felt then spent then lost. And we fool ourselves they're years...'

His arm curled round her shoulder, his hand moved gently to the nape of her neck, stroked the dark hair there, then ran to Francesca Malahide's cheek.

'I think...' she whispered.

Swiftly, with a practised sureness, his mouth went to her ear, nibbled once, then said something.

Francesca listened, blinked, felt her breath catch as the glass of grappa tumbled to the floor.

It was a proposition. The proposition.

'Mayflies,' he whispered again, and started to nuzzle her temple.

This close there was a smell to him. The dead dry fragrance of old women, lavender and dust. As his cold lips closed on her skin a hank of silver hair broke free as if brittle and fell softly against her cheek like a dead moth tumbling from a wardrobe that hadn't been opened in centuries.

'Oh no. Oh no!' Francesca Malahide cried then fled timorously down the narrow staircase, all the way back to her room.

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SHE WOKE the next morning at ten minutes past eleven, afflicted by a nagging headache made worse by a bitter sense of regret. In a few frantic minutes she showered, changed into fresh clothes, rushed down into the small breakfast room. It was empty. So, it seemed was the hotel. Only Aldo, the same charming man at reception.

'Mr Newhouse,' Francesca said, trying not to seem too anxious. 'Has he checked out?'

He looked at her blankly.

'Mr Jack Newhouse. He had the suite at the top of the stairs. The one with a view to San Marco. Has he...?'

'We have no guests called Newhouse. As of this morning we have no guests. Except you. And I believe you return to England...'

'The suite at the top of the stairs!'

Aldo shook his head.

'Come with me,' Francesca ordered, grabbing him by the lapel.

They marched up the narrow staircase. The door looked

different somehow. It was plainer and bore a sign saying 'Office'.

'He stayed here,' she insisted.

'But this is not for guests...'

'Open it!'

The man shrugged, took out a set of keys and obeyed.

Francesca marched through, blinking against the bright winter daylight streaming through the long windows. The view was the same, even more beautiful now with the majestic shape of the basilica of Salute close by, then San Marco and the Doge's Palace across the water.

A line of old brown filing cabinets stood where the chaise-longue had been. There was no four-poster bed with flowing drapes by the wall, only three desks with phones and computers. No carpet on which a tell-tale grappa stain might have remained, just old and dusty tiles.

'You moved things,' she cried, knowing how ridiculous it sounded.

'Let me get you a coffee and some breakfast,' Aldo suggested. 'On New Year's Eve strange things can happen...'

She barely heard. There was a sepia engraving on the wall next to the desks. A handsome man in a wig. He had kindly, animated features, almost feminine. A pleasant expression, innocent but with a touch of the devil in it.

There was a name at the foot of the portrait: Giacomo Girolamo Casanova de Seingalt.

'The great lover stayed here when he returned to Venice towards the end of his life,' Aldo explained. 'The place had just been built. Hence our name.'

He came to stand next to her, admiring the view.

'Casanova di Casanova. Casanova's new house. A little joke.'

Jack Newhouse. Giacomo Casanova. A hank of dry hair

fluttering against her cheek in the dark. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

'The poor man was ill and impoverished. A young seamstress called Francesca Buschini loved him very much and cared for him, here. But Casanova was a rascal always. He fled the city for good, and abandoned poor Francesca.'

His hand went to the picture, straightening it.

'If you read his memoirs you'll see, I think, he regretted this. But Casanova had cause for many regrets. There are some silly stories too. About ghosts and suchlike. Things that return. But honestly...'

Aldo waved his bunch of keys until they rang. A polite invitation to leave.

'This is a city of ghosts. As for things that return...' His hand swept the glorious panorama ahead of them. 'I'm a Venetian. Why would one ever leave?'

'Why...?' she murmured.

'I can offer you a room for half price tonight. The best in the house.' He laughed. 'Better than an old office. We have the staff party. You should join us. Meet real Venetians for a change. Not this Mr Jack Newhouse, whoever he is...'

'Will there be spritz?' she asked immediately. 'And cicchetti?'

The hotel man looked surprised.

'Of course,' he said with a nod.

Mayflies, Francesca Malahide thought to herself. That's all we are.

'I'd like that, Aldo,' she told him and smiled.