Tell it to the Skies

Erica James

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One

It happened so quickly.

She had been hurrying from the market side of the Rialto Bridge, trying to avoid the crush of tourists in the packed middle section of shops, when a single face appeared in the crowd as if picked out by a bright spotlight entirely for her benefit. She turned on her heel to get a better look. And that was when she missed her footing and ended up sprawled on the wet ground, the contents of her handbag scattered.

Any other time Lydia might have been appalled at this loss of dignity, yet all she cared about, whilst a voluble group of Americans helped her to get back on her feet, was the man who had caused her to slip. She scanned the crowded steps for his retreating figure in the fine, drizzling rain. But he was long gone.

If he'd been there at all, Lydia thought as she relaxed into the chair and felt the downy softness of the cushions enfold her. The doctor had left ten minutes ago, promising the delivery of a pair of crutches in the morning. Her ankle was now expertly strapped and resting on a footstool. *Dottor* Pierili's parting words had been to tell her to keep the weight off her foot for as long as possible. He'd wanted her to go to the hospital for an X-ray, just to be on the safe side, but she'd waved his advice aside, politely yet firmly. Bandages, rest and painkillers would suffice.

'I still don't know how you managed to get home,' Chiara said, coming into the living room with a tray of tea things. She put the tray on a pedestal table between a pair of tall balconied windows that looked down onto the Rio di San Vio. The weak, melancholy December light had all but faded and the spacious room glowed with a soft-hued luminosity. Strategically placed lamps created a beguilingly serene atmosphere, making it Lydia's favourite room in the apartment. She was a self-confessed lover of beautiful things; it was what brought her to Venice in the first place. Living here she

was surrounded by beauty on a scale she had never encountered anywhere else. Venice's glorious but crumbling architecture together with its proud history combined to produce a profoundly sad and haunting sense of identity that appealed enormously to Lydia. It was the apparent isolation of the place that touched her; it was somewhere she felt she could be separate from the rest of the world.

She would always remember her first glimpse of Venice. It was early evening and as the *vaporetto* entered the basin, the city was suddenly there before her, floating like a priceless work of art in the distance, the low sun catching on the gilded domes and *campanili*. It was love at first sight. From then on she was a willing victim to Venice's trembling beauty and the spell it cast on her. Even with the myriad challenges that the city was forced to cope with – the growing threat of *acqua alta*, the ever-increasing crowds that were choking the narrow *calli*, and the graffiti (almost worst of all to Lydia) that was spreading endemically through Venice – it was still a place of dreams for her. Even the relentless chorus of 'Volare' and 'O Sole Mio!' coming from the gondoliers as they cruised the waterways with their cargo of nodding and smiling Japanese tourists could do nothing to diminish her love for her adopted home.

'You're either the bravest woman I know or the stupidest,' Chiara said as she handed Lydia a cup of tea.

Lydia smiled, noting that Chiara had gone to the trouble of digging out her favourite bone china cup and saucer. 'Undoubtedly the latter,' she replied. 'That's certainly what your father would have said.'

'You probably did more damage walking on it than when you slipped.'

'He would have agreed with you on that point too. And said that for a forty-six-year-old woman I should have known better.'

Chiara crossed the room for her own cup then came and curled up in the high-backed chair next to Lydia. It was where Marcello always used to sit, his hand outstretched to Lydia as he quietly read the *Gazzettino*.

'I want you to know that this arrangement will only go on for a day or two,' Lydia said, keen to establish that she would soon be back at work, business as usual.

Chiara, all twenty-four years of her, gave Lydia a quelling stare, her eyes dark and shining in the muted light. 'Oh, no you don't. We can manage perfectly well without you.'

'That's what I'm worried about. I don't want you getting too used to my absence.'

'Now there's an idea. A boardroom coup.'

The shrill ring of the telephone in the hall had Chiara getting to her feet. Within seconds it was obvious the call wasn't for Lydia. Selfishly she hoped it wasn't one of Chiara's friends inviting her out for the evening; she could do with the company.

This neediness had nothing to do with her sprained ankle, and all to do with not wanting to be alone. If she was alone, she might dwell on that face in the crowd. And that was definitely something she didn't want to do. An evening with Chiara would be the perfect distraction.

It was a matter of pride to Lydia that she and Chiara didn't have the usual mother and daughter relationship. For a start Lydia wasn't actually Chiara's mother: she was her stepmother. It was a clumsy label Lydia had dispensed with at the earliest opportunity. Chiara had always called her by her Christian name, anyway.

Lydia had never told anyone this, but it had been Chiara who she had fallen for first – her love for Marcello, Chiara's father, had come later. They had met fifteen years ago, when Chiara was nine and Lydia had been employed to teach the little girl English. She received a phone call in response to one of her advertisements offering her services, and three days later a distinguished-looking Signor Marcello Tomasi and his only daughter arrived at her apartment in Santa Croce. She was a painfully shy, introverted child and it didn't take long to realize why: her mother, as her quietly spoken father explained, had died last winter. Nobody could have empathized more with the young girl. Lydia knew exactly how it felt to have your world turned upside down and inside out. Every ounce of her being made her want to take away Chiara's sadness, to make her face light up with a smile.

The lessons always started at four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and took place in Lydia's tiny kitchen. She thought it would be a less intimidating environment for this fragile child than to sit at the formal desk in the sitting room. There would always be a pot of freshly made hot chocolate on the table, along with a box of delicious almond biscuits from her local *pasticceria*. Lydia's other students were never offered more than tea or coffee, or fruit juice if she happened to have any in the fridge. Gradually her young pupil began to grow in confidence, which meant she looked less likely to burst into tears if she got anything wrong.

Without fail Marcello Tomasi would return for his daughter as the bell from San Giacomo dell'Orio struck five. He would hand over the agreed amount of money, check that they were still on for

the following Saturday and then wish Lydia a pleasant evening. However, one day, just as Lydia was opening the door for them to leave, Chiara did something that changed everything. She beckoned her father to bend down to her, cupped her hand around her mouth and whispered into his ear. Straightening up, he cleared his throat, rubbed his hand over his clean-shaven chin and said, 'Chiara would like to invite you to her birthday party next week.'

The thought of a roomful of over-excited, noisy Italian children held no appeal for Lydia. As if reading her mind, Marcello Tomasi said, 'It will be just a small party. I think Chiara would very much like you to be there. And so would I,' he added.

The party was bigger than Lydia had been led to believe, but it was very much a family affair with the only children present being a handful of Chiara's cousins, most of whom were younger than her and blessedly well behaved. After six months of teaching this man's only daughter and forming a strong, protective relationship with her, but exchanging no more than a few words with him, it was strange to be in his home; it felt oddly intimate. She was suddenly seized with the urge to snoop and pry, to find out more about this immaculately dressed, taciturn man. She knew that he worked on the mainland in Marghera, the nearby industrial zone that was generally considered to be the Beast to Venice's Beauty. She also knew, from Chiara, that he was *very*, *very* important and had *lots* of people working for him. Judging from the house – a two-storey, stylishly restored property a stone's throw from Ca'Doro – he had excellent taste and lived in a degree of comfort. But this scant amount of detail wasn't enough for Lydia; she wanted to know what he did for pleasure. Did he read? If so, what books did he read? What music did he listen to? What did he eat for his supper? More to the point, who cooked his supper? Did he cook it himself, or did he have help? Chiara had never mentioned anyone.

Even if she had had the nerve to carry out any actual unseemly rifling through Marcello's personal effects for answers to her questions, there was no opportunity to do so. Chiara took her excitedly by the hand and introduced her in overly rehearsed English to her many relatives, one by one. 'This is Miss Lydia, my very nice English teacher … This is Miss Lydia, my very nice English teacher.' The responses were all in Italian, which was fine by Lydia; she had been speaking Italian since she was eighteen. She might only have been in Venice for two years but she could manage a passable version of *la parlata*, the local dialect, which seemed to her to be entirely made up on a whim solely to vex outsiders.

Everyone at the party was very welcoming and took it in turns to press plates of tempting food onto her as well as top up her glass of Prosecco. But she took pains not to outstay her welcome; this was a family affair, she reminded herself. Shortly after the children had been called upon to sing for the adults, accompanied on the piano by Fabio, Marcello's brother – apparently a family tradition – she tried to make her exit as discreetly as possible, but Chiara was having none of it and announced to everyone that her *very nice English teacher* was leaving. Endless goodbyes then ensued until at last she was rescued by Marcello who, having instructed Chiara to offer her sweet-toothed great grandmother another helping of *dolce*, steered Lydia away.

'I hope that wasn't too awful for you,' he said when they were standing outside in the courtyard garden, the cool night air making her realize how warm she'd been inside and how much Prosecco she'd drunk. She could feel the heat radiating from her cheeks.

'I had a lovely time,' she said truthfully, thinking how much she really had enjoyed herself.

'It wasn't too overwhelming?'

'Not at all. It was good to see Chiara so happy. She's a delightful child; you must be extremely proud of her.'

'She is and I am. I don't know if you're aware of it, but she's grown very close to you.'

'The feeling is mutual. She's charming company.'

'Are you busy tomorrow evening?'

'I don't think so. Why?'

'Will you have dinner with me?'

And that, six months after losing her heart to his daughter, was the start of her relationship with Marcello. A man who, ten years older than her, in no way fitted her idea of a typical Italian. He wasn't one of those rumbustious Italian men who constantly argue about politics and corruption in high places and claim they could change everything overnight if only given the chance. Nor did he have the infuriating habit of shouting '*Ascoltami!*' ('Listen to me!') every other sentence. And not once did he grab her arm to make sure he had her full attention during a conversation. Instead there was a quiet and intelligent reserve about him. He was courteous to a fault and very astute. He realized and accepted that there was a part of her he would never know or understand. 'Your life is like a photograph album with occasional blank spaces where some of the pictures have been removed,' he said on the day he asked her to be his wife.

'Does it matter to you?' she replied.

'No,' he answered. 'I think it's those mysterious gaps I love most about you.'

Perhaps if he had pressed her, she might have shared more of herself with him.

The sound of Chiara's happy laughter, as she continued talking to whoever it was on the phone, broke through Lydia's thoughts and, not for the first time, she wondered how the painfully shy child she had met fifteen years ago had grown into this confident, carefree young woman, a young woman who had had to cope with the loss of both her parents before she'd turned twenty-one. Lydia liked to think that she'd played a part in Chiara's recovery from the death of her mother – Marcello always believed she had – but all she'd done was give the child what she had never experienced when she was that age: love and stability.

Having children had never been something Lydia had particularly craved. However, having Chiara in her life had felt exactly the right thing to do.

That night she slept badly, her sleep disturbed by a host of fragmented dreams. In one dream the siren sounded, signalling *acqua alta*. Venice was sinking. The water was lapping at her feet as she tried desperately to make it home to Chiara. But she was lost; every *calle* she ran into was a dead end. The siren continued to ring out. The ancient wooden supports creaked and groaned and finally they gave way and the buildings crumbled and slid slowly but surely into the lagoon.

She woke with a start and lay in the dark remembering a Bible story from her childhood, about the man who built his house upon the sand. Pastor Digby had his long, bony finger raised accusingly to her; he was asking if she understood what the story was teaching her.

Once she'd allowed one memory to enter her thinking, others began flooding in too. Her next mistake was to attach too much meaning to the dream. Was her life disintegrating? Had she built her life on foundations that were about to give way?

She pulled the duvet up over her head, blaming that wretched face in the crowd. Who was he? A ghost?

Chapter Two

The following morning the promised pair of crutches arrived, as did a succession of visitors throughout the day, all of whom had been despatched by Chiara to entertain Lydia.

'Another one who's been sent to keep me company, I presume,' Lydia said tiredly after she'd buzzed up Marcello's brother, Fabio. His wet, bedraggled appearance was a clear indicator of the kind of day it was outside. The lower edges of his overcoat were drenched, his furled umbrella was dripping onto the marble floor, and his trousers were tucked into a pair of black, knee-high rubber boots.

'Would you rather I left you to rest?' he asked. From his coat pockets he retrieved a bag of *biscotti* and a bottle of Vin Santo. Smiling, he dangled them in front of her. 'I could always keep these for myself.'

'Well, seeing as you've gone to so much trouble, perhaps I'll let you stay.' She watched him take off his coat and boots, then set off awkwardly down the length of the hallway on the crutches, negotiating the rugs with care. Fabio followed behind in his stockinged feet. 'What dear, well-meaning Chiara forgot,' Lydia said, conscious that she was sounding less than gracious, 'in her attempt to keep me occupied for the day, was that I would have to be up and down like a yo-yo to let you all in.'

'In that case, I'd better stay until she returns so you won't be further inconvenienced.'

'Now you're just making me feel like an ungrateful bitch.'

He laughed. 'And with so little effort, *cara*.' He put his gifts down on the coffee table and helped her to get comfortable on the sofa.

'So why aren't you hard at work?' she asked.

'I'm the boss; I can take time off whenever I want.'

'I'll tell Paolo you said that.'

He laughed again. 'It was Paolo who insisted I drop everything and come and see you after Chiara called.'

'Hah, so he's to blame.'

'I think you need a drink to sweeten that sour tongue of yours.' He fetched a pair of glasses from the kitchen and poured out two generous measures of Vin Santo. He opened the packet of *biscotti* and passed it to Lydia. Of all her visitors that day, Fabio was probably the most welcome. As Marcello's younger brother, there had only ever been a vague physical resemblance between the two men, but the bond between them had been a strong one, had marked them out as being cut from the same cloth.

'So how did you hurt yourself?' Fabio asked after he'd chinked his glass against Lydia's and sat down.

'Too silly to say.'

'Oh, come on, I could do with a good laugh.'

'I thought you were here to make *me* laugh?'

'I know a lost cause when I see one. What did you do, kick some poor tourist out of your way and lose your balance?'

She smiled, but didn't say anything. Instead she dunked a biscuit into her drink then sucked on it, aware that Fabio was watching her closely. She knew all too well that he could spot the slightest change in her a mile off.

'What is it, *cara*?' he said. 'You don't seem yourself. You look distracted.'

She wished that her brother-in-law wasn't so sensitive and perceptive. After Marcello's death from a heart attack four years ago it was his shoulder she had cried on, just as it was his hand, along with Chiara's, that she had held during the funeral service. He had always been there for her. She had joked once that it was as well he was gay or people would certainly have got the wrong idea about them. But right now she would give anything for him not to care so much for her.

'It's being stuck here,' she said, pointing at her ankle. 'I feel so useless.'

Looking far from convinced by her explanation, Fabio sat back and crossed one leg over the other. 'It's nothing to do with Chiara, is it?' he asked.

She took a sip of her drink, enjoying its dry, sweet warmth on her throat. 'Chiara's fine,' she said. 'And anyway, didn't I just say what's wrong with me?'

Fabio stared at her doubtfully. 'So if it's not Chiara,' he persisted, 'is it work? You've built up quite a business there; it's not becoming too much for you, is it?'

She shook her head. 'Work's fine.' Again, she was telling the truth. The business she and Marcello had started together had never

looked in better shape. Shortly after he'd proposed to her, Marcello announced his intention to leave the chemical company where he was the research director. He had always felt that nature of his work was at odds with his love for Venice – given the environmental effect the industrial zone was having on the lagoon – but he had eased his conscience by saying it was better that someone like him had a say in how things were done, than someone who didn't care. 'I want to do something new,' he told her. 'And it has to be something we can do together.' They soon came up with the idea of running a lettings agency, initially acting on behalf of private and individual owners, but eventually investing in property themselves. Before long, they had an impressive portfolio of apartments to offer clients, most of whom were British, American, French and German. After Marcello's death, and as a direct result of working the worst of her grief out of her system, the agency became even more successful. She now had a reliable team of girls working for her in the newly expanded office, including Chiara who joined the agency when she had finished her studies in Bologna two years previously. As architects, Fabio and his partner Paolo had played their part by helping with any restoration work that was required in the properties. They had also overseen the work carried out on this very apartment, which she and Marcello had moved into only eighteen months before his death.

The irony of her line of work was not lost on Lydia. Like so many Venetians who complained bitterly about the number of visitors to Venice, she actively encouraged tourists to pour in for the sake of her livelihood. There was also the more controversial matter of Venice's dwindling population. Hardly a day went by when there wasn't a piece written in the *Gazzettino* about the plight of young locals being forced to live on the mainland because they couldn't afford the sky-high prices here in Venice. Prices that had been inflated by outside investors. It was a problem that had everyone in agreement: something would have to be done. But meanwhile, life had to carry on and people made their living the best way they knew how, by welcoming tourists with open arms and giving them a thorough fleecing.

'If it's not Chiara or work that's bothering you,' said Fabio, 'is it loneliness?' He paused, and Lydia could see he was choosing his next words with care. 'Do you think it's time to move on?'

For a while now Fabio had been discreetly hinting that she ought to find someone to take Marcello's place. Lydia smiled. 'Oh, Fabio, I know how you worry about me, and I appreciate it, really I do. But it's not that. Not that at all.'

'*Sei sicura?*'

'Yes, I'm sure. To be honest, I'm usually too busy to give it a thought.'

'That's not healthy.'

'It's the way it is.'

'Then perhaps it's time you changed your ways. When was the last time you had a holiday?'

'Don't be ridiculous. What would I do with a holiday?'

He shook his head in what she hoped was defeat, but taking her by surprise, he said, 'Sometimes I think you go out of your way to punish yourself. For the life of me I can't think why.'

You don't know the half of it, she thought grimly.