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Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

Chapters 1 and 4

ONE

When Judith Kalman arrived in Venice, she was caught off guard by the unusual weather. It was raining, and this in the middle of July. The train made its way up to the causeway and she could see how clouds of varying inky hues cast their shadows onto the dull sea, agitated by restless winds.

She had taken the train that arrived at midday and so expected, with the sun at its peak, a bare canopy of arid white sky and piercing heat. It was hot, but in that muggy, tropical way that made you believe those stories about flamingos living in the Po Delta. A seagull flying alongside the train was forced up through the air by wet gusts of wind, as if, lopsided and windswept, it were part of a mobile, suspended by a thread.

Judith prepared herself for a wait in the station; her light green leather handbag was not good in the rain, nor was the blouse of white crushed silk. The familiar wooden posts stood in the lagoon, blackened by moisture. They leaned against each other in threes, held together by two iron rings from which orange rust streaks seeped. Usually you could see by the waterline how the salty air had gnawed beaver-like at the posts, and how the luminous green algae was creeping upwards; but now everything was blurred and silvery in the haze.

It is beyond me why anyone would want to travel to Venice in July, and once I have a say in things, it will not happen again.

When Judith emerged from the train station, the spell had been broken. Any remaining clouds turned white and coral-shaped before scurrying away. The sun was already beginning to dry the steps and forecourt. The church of San Simeon Piccolo on the opposite side of the Canal Grande was scaffolded, spoiling Judith's initial view. The white steps, the white pillars, the triangular pediment – that is what you looked forward to when you stepped out of the station and gazed across at the central part of the city, whose outer shell you had just perforated by train.

A rapidly lengthening line of tourists snaked up to the ACTV booth. Judith hurriedly pulled her suitcase down the steps to join it. Each time she sold a vaporetto ticket, the ACTV employee consulted at length with a colleague standing behind her. Evidently staff training was in progress. In the middle of the high season, in the middle of the lunchtime rush, at the station, of all places. The first in the queue to start complaining were the Italians. The

foreigners were still willing to blame their wait on the easy-going Mediterranean character and were not prepared to let anything dampen their holiday spirits. Judith, on the other hand, was not about to stand for anything. Any minute now, she would step out of the queue and take a water taxi. To escape into the peace of an empty boat, to the coolness that emanated from its varnished wood panelling. To look out of the open window, elbows resting on the roof. To hold her face to the wind, lapping up the driver's compliments when he turned with a smile.

The rain-cleansed sun blazed down, English, French, Dutch and German tourists wanted to buy vaporetto tickets, and obviously no Venetian management was going to be prevented from calmly carrying out staff training in this situation.

Markus Bachgraben, how on earth can anyone go to Venice in July?

Tita's flat lay right on the quays of the Fondamenta Nuove and was not at all how Judith had imagined it. To start with, the Fondamenta Nuove did not look like they normally did, having been turned into a building site. There was no indication of what precisely was being torn up, fenced in, broken up or destroyed.

Judith knew that Tita's flat was made up of two flats joined together, and she had imagined it to be airy and well laid out; instead, it was warren-like and full of nooks and crannies. There were far too many small rooms, all linked together across the second and third floors of the building. Judith flung open the doors and shutters. Some rooms looked out onto tiny inner courtyards that were little more than light wells, some onto narrow alleyways, some onto the lagoon and the building site on the Fondamenta. The postcard view over to the Isola di San Michele, the cemetery island, with its black jagged cypresses, gripped her like a pulse suddenly returning to a lifeless animal. Tita said that legends told of witches who flew over the wall at night in their black-veiled gondolas to dance on the graves, although she had never seen any.

Judith went downstairs to take a look at the house from the outside. It bordered a canal on one side, where all the windows had been bricked up. Tita was planning to open up the windows in her flat, sealed since the days of Austrian rule.

Tita had said that, at the time, the rulers had tried to obstruct the rebels' activities by cutting them off from the canals. That way they could not drop any heavy or unsavoury objects onto passing Austrian boats.

In the ice cream parlour two doors down, Judith bought a cone of coconut ice cream. She spread the street map out on the little bar table. Behind the fences of the building site they were drilling, hammering and dust-making. She needed to go to the Rialto Bridge to cross the Canal Grande to San Polo, where Markus Bachgraben's flat was located. At Campo Santo Sofia it was also possible to cross with the traghetto, but it only ran in the mornings. If she did not want to walk, she would have to make lengthy detours with the vaporetto or take a water taxi. It would have been more convenient to stay in one of the hotels right on the Canal. But as Judith had let Tita stay in her house in Ireland for years, Tita had now insisted on letting her stay in the new flat in Venice.

A motorboat passed by, with a snow-white West Highland terrier on its bow, sniffing the wind. The young man at the wheel wore shorts and sunglasses. He was bronzed. He smiled at Judith as he sliced through the water, spraying froth. Judith smiled back. She felt as if she were being unfaithful.

She went back upstairs to see if Signora Vescovo had followed all the instructions. She and Tita had arranged for the housekeeper to come early in the morning, starting on the day of Judith's arrival. There were four bedrooms, where the beds had been tautly and freshly made up and decorated with pillows. One of the rooms was so small that it could only hold a single bed. Another was abnormally hot, for no apparent reason. Maybe it was under a tin roof. There remained a bedroom on the third floor with a view of the Isola di San Michele, and one on the second floor overlooking the alley. She would have to keep the shutters closed most of the time, if she did not want to be watched from the windows opposite.

The room on the third floor was cool. Although the sun streamed in through the high windows, it had something gloomy about it. Like the other rooms in the flat, it was filled by

Tita with a jumble of antiques which Tita had had delivered in several boatloads. Tita's husband, who for years had struggled to 'reclaim floor space' in the flat in Vienna, had promised to give her free rein in Venice. A stuffed crowned crane strutted atop a small inlaid cabinet; next to it stood a red-lacquered fake coral, probably from some treasure trove. A troop of African statuettes stared out of the man-high fireplace. An antique Chinese bed stood diagonally across the room. Lying on it, Judith could look directly onto the Isola di San Michele. Tita had explained that, in such an old city, you had to make peace with the ghosts. After all, the dead lay everywhere, in thick strata, for when the old cemeteries were abandoned and the dead relocated to their own island, only the top layer had been exhumed. You lived and walked around on one big graveyard. Alleyways and buildings had been erected over the graves, but even if you could not see them, they were still there. Not everyone could bear that much past, which unavoidably brought with it a collection of deaths. Some fell prey to anxiety and would see omens everywhere. Others felt that something strange was creeping inside them and changing them.

The kitchen was on the second floor. Judith sat down on a chair and listened. The flat was full of noises. Noises from the neighbouring flat, the neighbouring buildings, the entire city. Tita said that in Venice it had always been necessary to keep many things secret because so much was public. The noises seemed to come from all parts of the flat; it even felt like someone was walking through the kitchen. Amid all the steps and voices, creaks and clatters, it would be impossible to pick out the sound of a burglar.

You would need a dog if you wanted to notice a burglar in time. A large, protective one – maybe an English Shepherd.

On the wall hung a black and white photograph of the collapse of the Campanile di San Marco in 1902. Judith's great-grandfather had been two years old in 1902. On the sideboard stood a bottle of Lagrein. Judith stood up to open the fridge. She had written a shopping list for Signora Vescovo, which Tita had passed on:

1. Fruit (including lemons)
2. Vegetables that do not require cooking
3. Lean ham
4. Water (still and sparkling)

5. Red wine
6. Prosecco
7. NO BREAD
8. NO BUTTER
9. AND NOTHING ELSE

Everything she had requested was there; what she didn't want was not. Judith could imagine the Signora: a well-groomed woman in her mid-fifties, slightly stout. Friendly, without being indiscreet. Married, her husband a butcher at the Rialto market. Two grown-up children. The son a bank clerk (and illegal mussel fisher at night), the daughter the owner of a small boutique.

The ringing of the telephone seemed to come from every room at once. In the hallway Judith spun in a circle, listening, then went into the drawing room. The telephone stood on a chinoiserie writing desk right under the window. It went on ringing without an answering machine picking up. Judith looked out of the window.

The sun's reflections on the water sparkled as if thousands of glass shards were drifting in the lagoon. A racing gondola, manned by five standing rowers, shot out towards the vaporetto coming from Murano without slowing down in the slightest. The Vaporetto did not yield either. The intersection of the two routes, the collision and the bang that they would make became apparent. Then the racing gondola flitted past the bow of the vaporetto, outwitting fate. When Judith looked back at the telephone, it stopped ringing. A book of Venetian ghost stories lay on the writing desk. When she opened it, a note, handwritten by Tita fell out: "NONE OF THIS IS TRUE!" Judith began to read a story about Marco Polo's unhappy bride. She was a Chinese princess who had left the imperial court, her home and her family behind to follow the man she loved to Venice. The Venetians did not like her. Her appearance, her accent and her behaviour were not only strange, but also disconcerting. When at last Marco Polo too turned his back on her to marry a Venetian woman, she threw herself from the balcony of her palazzo to her death. 'To this day she can be seen walking up and down the balcony, sighing in the moonlit nights. She wears a wide yellow silk robe and her long jet-black hair billows wildly around her head as she wrings her hands, lamenting.'

The telephone rang again. Judith closed the book and waited. The monotony of the ringing made her sleepy. As soon as it had ended, she reopened the book at a new page and read

about the construction of the Basilica Santa Maria della Salute that lay at the entrance to the Canal Grande. Pale ghost-children and black, growling ghost-dogs frightened the workers. Invisible hands pulled their hair and slapped their faces, disembodied voices mumbled across the building site, streams of blood gushed out of the ground. The telephone began to ring again.

It turned out that the bones in the old graveyard on which the Basilica had been built had not been moved. The dead needed to be reburied in a tranquil place. Judith closed the book and picked up the telephone.

It was her sister, Katalin. She had called on the landline because she had been afraid that Judith would not answer her mobile. She had something urgent to tell her. Judith hung up.

FOUR

Caffè Florian had once been an important meeting place, but it had become a place of refuge for Judith ever since she had been denied a visit there. Since her stay in Venice with Wolfgang, each visit to Caffè Florian was a gratification and a compensation.

That had been in 1999. Wolfgang had invited her for a long weekend in Venice. Their relationship was still fresh and Judith had seen the invitation as a sign of old-fashioned gallantry. It pleased her; it had become so rare. Erika and Nora said that by not vocalising an invitation, the modern man was stating that he considered women to be his equal. In Judith's opinion he was stating that he had no manners. Wolfgang wanted to show her *his Venice*. She was curious to see whether it differed from anyone else's Venice.

The *idyllic little guesthouse* that Wolfgang had chosen had put Judith into a mood of doom and gloom. Her heart sunk like a lead weight into the depths; a black cloud enveloped her head. The guesthouse lay *in an unpretentious area, far from the hustle and bustle*. Meaning at the end of a stuffy cul-de-sac. The house did not look like Venice, but rather like a construction travesty from less favourable periods of the twentieth century. Claustrophobia. Marooned. Four days and three awful nights of confinement. The room was so small that the suitcase had to be stowed away on top of the wobbly wardrobe.

The only window looked out onto a canal, from which, *thank God, no noisy gondola traffic* was likely. Which was probably down to the fact that the charms of this canal were negligible.

“Isn’t this the real Venice feeling?” asked Wolfgang, and snuggled up to her from behind, as there was no room beside her at the window. Judging by the smell, the canal must be one of those that was barely reached by the tide. Urine. The idyllic guesthouse had probably been draining its sewage here for the last fifty years and now stood in the middle of it. The houses opposite were evidently uninhabited; the rotting shutters hung askew in the windows, crusted with pigeon guano.

Wolfgang worked in the management of an electronics company and, as Judith knew, drew a considerable salary. She was confused. The sheet was stained, which prompted him to comment, “I wouldn’t want everything to be sterile!”

When Judith pointed out the mildew marks on the ceiling, he should then at the very latest have said, “Ha ha! You fell for it! It was all a joke! Of course I’ve booked the penthouse suite at the Bauer Casa Nova. My God, you should have seen your face! Ha ha ha!” But Wolfgang just put his shaving things in the bathroom.

Only the thought of the Caffè Florian had got her through that night. Caffè Florian would make Wolfgang’s Venice normal again. But when they stood in front of it, unfathomable words came out of Wolfgang’s mouth: “We’re not mad enough to pay seven thousand lire for the orchestra here.”

“Per person,” Judith added, as if that were an argument.

“If you really want to hear that,” said Wolfgang, “then all you have to do is sit down on the step here.” They sat down on the step that separated the Procuratie from the square. It was impossible to find a spot where there was no pigeon muck. Wolfgang pushed a few empty ice cream tubs aside with his foot. Judith stretched out her legs and pulled her skirt as far as possible below her knees, so as not to offer her underwear as a subject for any tourist’s camera.

An understated romantic. Or else he was deeply in debt and scrimping and saving to feed two ex-wives and seven children. Judith was touched.

“And if you’re thirsty...”, Wolfgang said and pulled a water bottle from his rucksack. It would have been cruel not to drink the lukewarm water that he had brought along for her. He was a nature boy. Survival training in one of the world’s most expensive cities. And she was a reverse Eliza Doolittle, learning to dismount from her high horse. Little by little she needed to

get the dirt underneath her fingernails and speak some uncouth argot. She had to get a pure heart, like the girls from poor families.

“Although,” said Wolfgang, “no normal person wants to listen to these awful tearjerkers anyway.” *Alla Turca*. The orchestra was at this moment playing *Alla Turca* and Wolfgang had called it an awful tearjerker. Judith had been planning to fall slightly in love with Wolfgang in Venice, a project that was already gravely endangered. When a pair of pigeons landed on her feet, she jumped up and Wolfgang laughed happily. He was serious. He wanted a woman who used leaves for toilet paper, who ate raw sheep’s intestines and wore friendship bracelets. It was a mystery to Judith why he had chosen her. After all, they had met in a very upmarket fitness studio.

She had to allow herself to go with the flow. Make the most of the here and now. Not take everything so seriously. Hope. When they strolled past the Campanile, she had already built up so much hope that Wolfgang’s words took her by surprise: “We’re not mad enough to pay twenty thousand lire to go up there.” He had at least said twenty thousand lire. He had calculated the elevator price for two people, which meant that he thought of them as a couple.

A definite improvement since the Florian. The ‘we’ also made it hard to have any objection. With the ‘we’, Judith’s opinion was unpleasantly merged with his.

She said, “But it would be so romantic!”

She would later recount that no man had ever gone up the Campanile di San Marco with such a look of disgust.

There followed a long hike through Castello (“There are old women here who have never left the district in their whole life!” said Wolfgang, and pointed out said old women), then the crossing to Murano.

At the vaporetto station, a man received the tourists and announced in three languages that they should follow him, for now there was the unique opportunity to see a demonstration of glass-blowing, free of charge. His voice drowned out the chugging of the vaporetto motor, the seagulls’ screeches, the tourists’ chatter and the lapping of the waves. He had spread his arms in such a way that the people were forced to take his indicated route. By constantly repeating phrases like “Last chance for today!” and “Begin in five minutes!” he put susceptible victims under time pressure; with the words “Gratis!” and “Free!” he whipped the bargain-hunters among them into a fever. Judith had a predisposed victim at her side.

She realised what awaited her: burning hot furnaces. Jostling tourists. Standing in sweating masses while flames and molten clumps of glass sucked the oxygen out of the air. Chasing the man to the far end of the island, where, under normal circumstances, you would never go and never want to go. She felt her cheeks growing cold as her heart rate slowed and her blood circulation ebbed away from the surface of her skin; she could no longer feel her feet. Wolfgang's eyes shone. Shone at the man and towards the melting furnaces, into Wolfgang's Venice and past Judith.

"I don't feel good," she said.

"S'incomincia fra cinque minuti!" the man shouted.

Wolfgang's gaze moved undecidedly between the two of them. Judith pushed the man aside and ran, without looking back. At the first bridge she realised that Wolfgang had followed her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Hungry," she said, and crossed over the bridge towards the nearest restaurant.

"No problem," said Wolfgang "I've got everything right here."

Shortly afterwards, Judith was sitting on the edge of the quay, letting her legs dangle as Wolfgang had suggested. She was afraid to lose one of her shoes and moved as little as possible. A boat filled with coloured broken glass chugged past them. A few metres away two Japanese girls were also sitting on the pavement, drinking Beck's from a bottle and something else from a thermos, which probably was not coffee. Judith had the impression that they were waiting for some sort of feeling to set in, but perhaps it was only she who was waiting for a feeling to set in.

Wolfgang had bought peppers and tomatoes for her, which he now sliced with his Swiss Army knife. Judith had to admit that he was a very attractive man and looked like someone who could be on her wavelength. Surely she must be able to get on with a man who looked like that. So it was her fault. And if it was her fault, then it was her mother's fault for not preparing her. Her mother came from such a poor family that she had no use for *cheap chic*, *downshifting* and *hedonistic austerity*. She thought it altogether pretentious when well-to-do people spent the night in their deliberately simple hunting lodges, in itchy blankets, eating pea soup.

She had never been able to escape psychologically from her impoverished youth; she felt such discomfort about anything that might give an impression of poverty that she could not even stand the sight of a loose skirting board.

Judith imagined being poor, always having to walk on past pleasant places. She saw how Murano faded, how it became a dusty desert to be crossed. She was part of a game, she was playing a part in a script written by Wolfgang, whose meaning she was not yet sure of. Her behaviour was not natural, but rather wooden, even though she was trying to get into character. To live on a lower level. To be dependent on Wolfgang, waiting like a child to be fed.

She jumped up, went into the nearest shop and bought things. Wolfgang nodded uneasily when she asked him whether the necklace, the earrings and the bracelets suited her. She had everything wrapped and paid with her credit card. The credit card was black.

“I didn’t know...”, said Wolfgang. “I thought you weren’t working.”

During the series of conversations that inevitably followed this comment, yet which they had never intended to have, it became clear that Judith and Wolfgang had at least one thing in common: each had thought that it would be good for their erotic attraction if they knew as little as possible about each other. And neither had ever been less than satisfied with the erotic attraction.

So it was that Wolfgang, given that Judith had no job, had created an elaborate fantasy of dependency and a desire for patronage. He had feared that Judith lived in cramped quarters and so as to avoid putting her in a quandary, after the first few meetings in bars, had invited her to his place. So he had never seen her home, nor had he ever seen her car.

Judith’s passing remark that she had been given membership of the expensive fitness club as a gift (it had been a birthday present from Katalin) had given him the impression of someone who had been a kept woman all her life. One of those manager groupies who had missed the turning for marriage, he thought. From her last boyfriend, probably to sweeten the parting, she had received a pair of emerald earrings and a fitness club membership, so that she might seek out another benefactor there. Before she really missed the boat.

So in all those conversations that started in Murano and continued in Salzburg, Wolfgang discovered that Judith was actually financially independent, as was her sister, and that this was thanks to their father's entrepreneurial capacities. Judith discovered that Wolfgang – although he had entrepreneurial capacities too, which kept him from starving – lived by a completely different philosophy from the Kalmans when it came to spending money. He attached great importance to saving money in certain areas. Essentially, these areas covered everything with the exception of electronics, sports equipment, motorbikes and cars. To invest in these things made sense, elsewhere it did not.

Wolfgang learned that Judith drew up all sorts of lists, but did not keep track of her personal accounts. Judith learned that Wolfgang took the art of saving to such extremes that he selected groceries in the supermarket that were past their sell-by date and marked down. Wolfgang learned that Judith took the extravagance so far that a lost button was sufficient reason to get rid of an item of clothing. Bouquets of flowers she received that did not happen to go with her furnishings met with the same fate.

Judith learned that at Christmas Wolfgang presented his relations with second-hand mobile phones and scarves, and Wolfgang discovered that when skiing, Judith did not pack a thermos of hot soup, but rather patronised the alpine innkeepers. Judith learned that Wolfgang had once had a huge argument in London with his ex-wife (whom she heard of for the first time at this point), when she wanted to go for an outrageously expensive afternoon tea at Claridge's, and Wolfgang learned that Judith had never been to London without going to Claridge's for afternoon tea.

Judith found out that Wolfgang's Rolex was a very good imitation from Thailand and that he considered encounters with cockroaches in international budget hotels to enrich any trip. Wolfgang learned that Judith preferred not go to the theatre at all than to take a bad seat. Judith found out that Wolfgang never went to the theatre anyway, but paid for the cheapest tickets in the cinema and then went to sit farther back after the film began. Wolfgang learned that Judith would sooner die than take a doggy bag from a restaurant and Judith learned that Wolfgang would rather die than get rid of his old slippers. Wolfgang found out that Judith neither cleaned windows or fluff filters, nor de-scaled kettles – after all, there were specially trained staff for these things. Judith learned that Wolfgang used a toilet brush from the estate of his grandmother. Judith found out that Wolfgang dyed his own hair (which finally

explained a certain irritation at the sight of his temples); Wolfgang found out that Judith did not usually even wash her own hair. Judith found out that Wolfgang owned properties, which he rented out at a profit. Wolfgang found out that Judith owned valuable properties, which she let go to ruin at great cost. And the more that they began to view each other as sociological case studies, the more the erotic attraction began to dwindle.

When Judith finally arrived at Caffè Florian, she chose a table where she had a good view of both the orchestra and the square, with its constant commotion of tourists with pigeons fluttering on their heads and shoulders. The surge and pull of the familiar, catchy melodies; the waiter, whom she informed with a gentle smile that she had no objection to the orchestra charge; the southern afternoon sun on the fairytale buildings, the feeling of being the object of surreptitious glances; all this pleasure put her into a rapture that could at any moment turn into panic.

At being so self-sufficient, so lonely, so close to ecstasy.

The ironwood filigree of the Chinese bed that throws ornamental shadows into the room, the view of the Isola di San Michele, you will sleep and I will lie awake, eyes wide open, in your arms.