

## CHAPTER 2

*Juliet, Venice, May 1928* It turns out that Aunt Hortensia was right to have been suspicious of the mixed fried fish. The next morning she reported that she had vomited in the night and felt too weak to get up. Would I please ask for a boiled egg and tea to be sent up to her, and she would stay in bed all day. I delivered her message. The proprietress was most solicitous and insisted on chamomile tea—much better for the stomach. I ate breakfast alone in the garden while the pigeons perched hopefully on unused seats. Then I went back to my aunt.

“You don’t mind if I go out by myself, do you?” I asked. “I’d like to do some sketching.”

She frowned. “I don’t really think that would be suitable. What would your father say if I let you wander around Venice alone? What if you get lost? What if you stray to an undesirable part of the city?”

“I know the way to St Mark’s Square now,” I said. “I shall just go in that direction and sit and sketch. And it is broad daylight. And there are other tourists.”

She considered again before saying, “Very well. I suppose I can’t insist that you stay cooped up with me all day. But make sure you wear your hat, and don’t sit out in the sun too much.”

I tried not to show my elation as I stuffed my art supplies into my bag, put on my hat but not my gloves—who could possibly draw with gloves on?—and set off. I sat first in the square in front of Santo Stefano Church and sketched the fountain, then the children running barefoot around it. Then I moved on, pausing to sketch an interesting balcony with geraniums spilling over it, a column and even a door knocker in the shape of a lion’s head. So many wonderful things. If I wasn’t careful, I’d fill my whole sketchbook with Venice and have no space for Florence or Rome. I came to St Mark’s Square and tried to sketch the basilica with all of its crazy domes and statues, looking like something out of *One Thousand and One Nights*. I gave up in frustration. I needed more lessons in perspective, obviously. Then the campanile. That was so tall that it went off the top of the page. Another failure. I had more success with the famous clock. And with the people who sat outside the cafés, taking their morning coffee. Perhaps I was destined to be a portrait painter!

I tried to find a good spot to sketch the Bridge of Sighs but realized that the best views were from the other side. I retraced my steps to the waterfront and stood sketching the narrow canal with its lacy marble bridge. Several tourists tried to peer over my shoulder. *Oh dear. My art skills are certainly not good enough for public scrutiny yet,* I thought. I hurriedly closed my sketchbook, and at that moment the great bells from the campanile rang out. Twelve o’clock. Golly. *I’d better return for lunch, or Aunt H. will be worried.* I made my way back to St Mark’s Square and attempted to retrace my route home. I must have come out of the square by a different archway because I didn’t recognize where I was. There had not been a little canal running beside the street when I came in. I pressed on, in what I hoped was the right general direction. I was just crossing the canal via a little stone bridge when I heard a sound. At first I thought it was a baby crying. It was coming from the water beneath me. Then I looked down and saw a cardboard box floating past. And from the box came the sound. Not a baby, but what sounded like the mewling of kittens. Someone had thrown a box of kittens into the canal to drown them!

I looked around. Nobody in sight. I couldn’t just let the kittens float away until the box became sodden and they drowned. I went back to the side of the canal where there was a walkway, held on to a post and reached out as far as I could. The box was too far away for me to retrieve it and was moving slowly but steadily past. Soon it would pass between tall buildings where there was no footpath. There was nothing for it. I put my bag down, took off my hat, held my nose and jumped in. The water was surprisingly cold. I gasped and swallowed a mouthful, but struck out valiantly for the box. I hadn’t had much opportunity for swimming in England, apart from in the sea at Torquay, where one bobbed in the waves, and I realized too

late that my skirts had become awfully heavy, clinging to my legs. I tried to hold the box above me as I kicked out for the side of the canal. I managed to place it up on the walkway, then tried to climb out. That was when I realized the walkway was a good foot above the water and there were no steps in sight. I had no way out.

My sodden clothing and shoes were pulling me down now, and I was tiring fast. I tried to remember the Italian word for “help”—if I’d ever known it in the first place. What was it in Latin? If only I’d paid more attention to Miss Dear! I tried to cling to the side, but there was nothing to hang on to. Above my head, the kittens kept mewling and the box shook as if they might get out at any moment. Then suddenly I heard a noise. The put-put of an approaching motorboat. It drew level with me, and I was afraid it would run me down or go past without seeing me. I released one hand and waved.

“Help!” I cried.

A man’s face appeared over the side. “*Dio mio!*” he exclaimed. “*Un momento!*” He cut the motor. Strong arms reached down, and I was unceremoniously hauled aboard. He stared at me for a moment before saying, “You are English. *Sì?*”

I nodded. “How did you know?”

“Only a British girl would be foolish enough to go swimming in a canal,” he said in very proficient English. “Or did you fall in?”