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A Night on the Orient Express

Written by Veronica Henry

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A Night on the Orient Express

Veronica Henry



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Prologue

As the clock chimes midnight, in a siding just outside Calais a train sits waiting under a still sky. Above it the moon glimmers, bathing it in a silvery glow. The carriages are empty, but for the ghosts of passengers walking up and down the corridors, their fingertips gliding along the marquetry, their scent mingling in the stillness of the air. The faint trace of piano music floats away into the black velvet night, weaving its way amidst whispers and promises. For here a thousand stories have already unfolded, stories of love and hope, of passion and heartache, of reconciliation and parting.

There are eleven sleeping cars, three dining cars and a bar. In a few hours' time, these silent carriages will burst into life as the train is prepared for its journey. No surface will be left unpolished. The cutlery and glassware will shine. Not a speck of dust or a smear of grease will remain. The livery will be hosed down until the metal gleams. Every wish, every need, every possible whim is considered as the provisions are brought on board, from the tiniest pats of creamy butter to bottles of the finest champagne.

At last, the staff will stand to attention under the gaze of the train manager, their uniforms pristine, ready for the final inspection before it leaves for the station.

On the platform, the waiting passengers shiver slightly. Whether from the crispness of the air or the excitement of climbing on board the most famous train in the world, who can say? Either way, their stories are waiting to be told.

Here! Here it is. The first glimpse of the Orient Express as it slides regally towards the platform. The sun bounces off the mirror-bright glass of the windows as the station master strides forward. There is a satisfying whoosh as the brakes are applied, and the train comes to a halt, purring, resplendent, proud – yet somehow welcoming. Who can resist such an invitation?

Come. Gather up your belongings. Wind the scarf more tightly round your neck; pull on your gloves and your hat as you take your lover's arm.

Hurry – your seat is waiting . . .

One

Adele Russell didn't much care for telephones. They were, of course, a necessity. An integral part of daily life. She couldn't imagine being without one but, unlike many of her friends, she spent as little time on the phone as possible. She liked eye contact, and to be able to read body language, especially when she was doing business. There were so many opportunities to be misunderstood on the phone. It was harder to say the things you really wanted to say, and so much could be left unsaid. And one rarely allowed oneself the luxury of silence: a moment to ruminate before replying. Perhaps this was a hangover from the days when a telephone call was an indulgence, when one kept the imparting of information to a bare minimum, conscious of the cost?

Adele would have preferred to have today's conversation in person, but she didn't have that option. She had put the call off for long enough already. Adele had never been a procrastinator, but burying the past had taken such a supreme effort of will at the time, she was reluctant to unearth it again. As she picked up the phone, she told herself she wasn't being greedy or grabby or grasping. She was simply asking for what was rightly hers. And it wasn't as if she even wanted it for herself.

Imogen. Her granddaughter's image flickered in her mind for a moment. She felt a mixture of pride and guilt and worry. If it weren't for Imogen, she would be leaving Pandora's box firmly shut, she thought. Or would she? Once again, she reminded herself that she had every right to do what she was doing.

Her finger, with its brightly painted nail, hovered over the first zero for a moment before she pressed it. She might be eighty-four, but she still kept herself groomed and glamorous. She heard the long tone of an overseas ring. While she waited for it to be answered, she remembered how many times she had phoned him in secret all those years ago, heart pounding, nose filled with the telephone-box smell of stale smoke, pushing in the money as the pips sounded . . .

'Hello?' The voice was young, female, English. Confident.

Adele ran through the possibilities: daughter, lover, second wife, housekeeper . . . ? Wrong number?

'May I speak to Jack Molloy?'

'Sure.' The disinterest in the speaker's voice told Adele there was no emotional involvement. Probably a housekeeper, then. 'Who's calling, please?'

This was just a routine question, not paranoia.

'Tell him it's Adele Russell.'

'Will he know what it's about?' Again, routine, not interrogative.

'He will.' Of this she was certain.

'One moment.' Adele heard the speaker put the phone down. Footsteps. Voices.

Then Jack.

‘Adele. How very lovely. It’s been a long time.’

He sounded totally unfazed to hear from her. His tone was dry, amused, teasing. As ever. But all those years on, it did not have the same effect it once had. She had thought she was so grown up at the time, but she had been so very far from grown up. Every decision she had made had been immature and selfish, until the very end. That’s when her journey into adulthood had really begun, with the realisation that the world didn’t revolve around Adele Russell and her needs.

‘I had to wait until the time was right,’ she replied.

‘I saw William’s obituary. I’m sorry.’

Three lines in the newspaper. Beloved husband, father and grandfather. No flowers. Donations to his favourite charity. Adele spread her fingers out on the desktop and looked at her wedding and engagement rings. She still wore them. She was still William’s wife.

‘This isn’t a social call,’ she told him, sounding as businesslike as she could. ‘I’m calling about *The Inamorata*.’

There was a pause while he processed the information.

‘Of course,’ he replied. His tone was light, but she sensed he was crestfallen by her briskness. ‘Well, it’s here. I’ve looked after it for you with the greatest of care. She’s ready for you to collect. Any time you like.’

Adele felt almost deflated. She had been ready for a fight.

‘Good. I shall send somebody over.’

‘Oh.’ There was genuine disappointment in his voice. ‘I was hoping to see you. To take you for dinner at least. You’d like where I am. Giudecca . . .’

Had he forgotten that she’d already been there? He couldn’t have. Surely.

'I'm sure I would. But I no longer fly, I'm afraid.' It was all too much for her these days. The waiting, the discomfort, the inevitable delays. She had seen enough of the world over the years. She didn't feel the need to see any more of it.

'There's always the train. The Orient Express . . . Remember?'

'Of course I do.' Her tone was sharper than she intended. She saw herself, standing on the platform at the Gare de l'Est in Paris, shivering in the yellow linen dress with the matching coat that she'd bought in the rue du Faubourg the day before. Shivering not from the cold, but from anticipation and anxiety and guilt.

Adele felt her throat tighten. The memory was so bittersweet. She had no room for it, what with everything else. She had enough emotions to deal with right now. Selling Bridge House, where her children had been born and brought up, selling the gallery that had been her life, contemplating her future – and Imogen's: it had all been most unsettling. Necessary, but unsettling.

'I'll send someone over in about three weeks,' she told him. 'Will that be convenient?'

There was no reply for a moment. Adele wondered if Jack was going to be difficult after all. There was no paperwork to support her claim. It had just been a promise.

'Venice in April, Adele. I would be the perfect host. The perfect gentleman. Think about it.'

She felt the old anxiety tug at her insides. Perhaps she wasn't as immune as she thought? He'd always done this to her – made her want to do things she shouldn't do. In her

mind's eye, she was already at his door, curiosity having got the better of her.

Why would she want to put herself through the turmoil again? At her age? She shuddered at the thought. It was far better to keep it in the past. That way she was in control.

'No, Jack.'

She heard his sigh.

'Well, you know your own mind. Consider it an open invitation. I'd be delighted to see you again.'

Adele gazed out of the window that looked onto the river. A strong current, swollen by the March rain, rippled between the banks, sweeping along with a certainty she envied. Taking a step into the unknown was a risk. At her age, she preferred to know exactly where she was.

'Thank you, but I think perhaps . . . not.'

There was an awkward silence, which Jack finally broke.

'I suppose I don't need to tell you how much the painting's worth now.'

'It's not about that, Jack.'

His laugh was the same.

'I don't care if it is. It's yours to do with what you will. Though I hope you won't just be selling it to the highest bidder.'

'Don't worry,' she reassured him. 'It won't be going out of the family. I'm giving it to my granddaughter. For her thirtieth birthday.'

'Well, I hope it gives her as much pleasure as it's given me.' Jack sounded pleased.

'I'm sure.'

'She's thirty? Not much younger than you were—'

'Indeed.' She cut him off. She would have to be brisk.

They were straying into sentimentality. ‘My assistant will telephone you to keep you informed of the arrangements.’ She was about to end the conversation and ring off, but something made her soften. They were both old. Chances were they wouldn’t live another decade. ‘You’re well, I hope?’

‘All things considered, I can’t complain at all. Although I’m not as . . . vigorous as I once was.’

Adele smothered a smile.

‘How very lucky for Venice,’ she replied, slightly tart.

‘And you, Adele?’

She didn’t want to speak to him anymore. She felt smothered by the strong sense of what might have been, the feeling she had fought to keep at bay for all those years.

‘Very well. I’ve enjoyed my business, and my family is nearby. Life is good.’ She wasn’t going to show a chink or elaborate. ‘In fact, I must go. I have a lunch appointment.’

She rang off as quickly as was polite.

Her hands were shaking as she put the telephone back in its cradle. He still had an effect on her. She had never quite buried the longing. It had wormed its way up to the surface every now and again, when she least expected it.

Why hadn’t she accepted his invitation? What harm could it do?

‘Don’t be so ridiculous!’ Her voice rang out in the stillness of the morning room.

She looked up. The seascape was still hanging there – the one she had bid for on the day she and Jack first met. She had kept it over her writing desk ever since. Not a brush-stroke had changed in the intervening years. That

was the beauty of paintings. They captured a moment. They always stayed the same.

The thought brought her back to the task in hand. She had so much to organise: estate agents, accountants, lawyers were all waiting on her decisions. Many people had advised her not to make any drastic decisions until some time after bereavement, but she felt sure she'd left it long enough now. Bridge House was too big for one; the Russell Gallery was too much for her, even with Imogen pretty much running things. And Imogen had assured her, again and again, that she didn't want to take it over, that it was time for her to have a fresh challenge, that she had never intended to stay in Shallowford so long. Adele had offered to find a compromise, but Imogen had insisted that she wanted a clean break. Nevertheless, Adele felt guilty, which was why she was retrieving *The Inamorata*. It would be quite the most wonderful gift. She couldn't think of anyone in the world who would appreciate it more than Imogen, and it would go some way towards salving her conscience.

She thought back over the conversation she had just had. How would her life have turned out, if she hadn't had Jack in it? Would things have been different? She felt certain that she would never have had the drive and determination she had ended up with, if she hadn't known him. Yet would she, perhaps, have been happier?

'You couldn't have been happier,' she told herself crossly. 'Jack was an error of judgement. Everyone's allowed to make mistakes.'

This she believed firmly. You had to get things wrong, in order to get things right. And in the end, she *had* got things right . . .

She dragged her mind back to the present. That was enough self-flagellation. She had plans to put into place. She was going to make some big changes, all for the better. She looked around the morning room, the room where she had made most of her important decisions. She loved its high ceilings and the sash windows looking over the river. In fact, she loved every square inch of Bridge House. Perfectly symmetrical, in a soft red brick, it sat, not surprisingly, by the bridge in Shallowford, quite the prettiest house in the little market town. Nicky, the estate agent and Imogen's best friend, had told her it would be snapped up, probably before they had time to print the glossy brochures that showed off its perfect proportions, the walled garden, the dark-red front door with the arched fan light . . .

For a moment, Adele felt doubt in her plan. She would miss this house terribly. She suffered a stab of resentment at having to give it up. She reminded herself that it was better to make difficult decisions while you were still in control, and before events overtook you. Determined, she unscrewed the lid from her fountain pen and pulled a pad of paper towards her. Adele was far from computer-phobic, but she still found writing things down focused her mind so much better.

As she worked through her list, part of her conversation with Jack kept floating back.

The Orient Express. It still ran from London to Venice; she knew that. An iconic journey. Possibly the most famous journey in the world. A plan began to form in her mind. She did a search on her computer, found the website she

wanted, and browsed through the information. Before she had time to change her mind, she picked up the phone.

‘Hello? Yes, I’d like to book a ticket. A single to Venice, please . . .’

As she waited to be connected to the right person, her gaze fell once more on the painting that hung over her desk. Jack was right – she hadn’t been much older than Imogen the day she’d bought it. The day it had all begun. It seemed like only yesterday . . .