

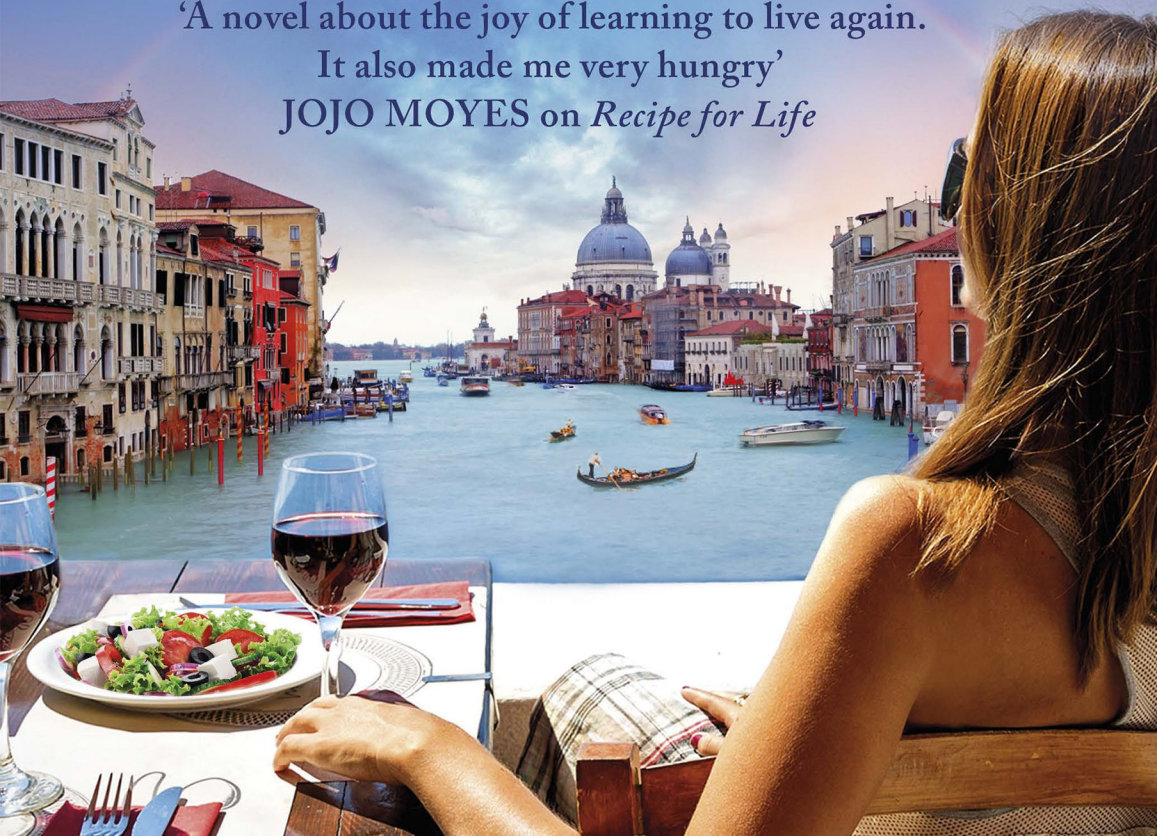
# Nicky Pellegrino

## A Year at Hotel Gondola

'A novel about the joy of learning to live again.'

It also made me very hungry'

JOJO MOYES on *Recipe for Life*





## *A Year at Hotel Gondola by Kat Black*

### CHAPTER 1

There is no sadder feeling than being jealous of your own life. Do you know what I mean? Have you ever been envious of the girl you once were? Looked back on your past and realised it was more exciting than your future is set to be? Have you ever felt that way? Because right now I'm doing my best to make sure I won't.

My life has been pretty interesting since I took sole charge of it. Oh, I had the same dull start as everyone else. School and homework, late-afternoon cartoons, setting the table for a meal of soggy vegetables and chewy meat, then early to bed and lying awake for hours, staring at a crack of light creeping beneath the door, thinking and thinking. Somehow I knew better things were waiting. I just had to find them, or help them find me.

Childhood is such a waste of time, isn't it? Mine seemed to drag on for ever. As soon as I was free of it – with my back turned on my northern hometown, with the train hurtling towards London Euston and a new life – I swore I wasn't going to waste another moment.

Obviously we all have to do the laundry and vacuum the floor so I haven't been living it large every single second. But I've tried to make the most of my time.

I've ridden on horseback over the Mongolian steppe and shared yak meat with nomads. Been fed seal blubber by Inuits in Greenland. Choked down fermented shark in Reykjavik. Breakfasted on crisp pancakes cooked by street hawkers in Shanghai and spicy dosa from a roadside stall in Mumbai. I've

followed my appetite around the world. You may have seen the television shows I've made, read some of the articles or books I've written? Mine has been an adventurous life; at least so far.

Then I turned fifty and something shifted. I blame my mother. 'Twenty good years,' she said. 'That's what you've got left at your age. After that you won't want to have adventures any more.'

I told her she was talking rubbish but after I'd put down the phone, I kept thinking about her words. Twenty good years didn't sound like enough. What if my mother was right? Perhaps at seventy I might feel entirely different than I did right now. Maybe there was some threshold you crossed then started craving safety and comfort. How could I know for sure?

That night I woke up at three a.m. and couldn't get back to sleep. Fears always seem so much bigger at that hour and I hoped by morning this one would be gone. But the worry had found a space in my mind and moved in. I couldn't get rid of it.

I rang my mother back. 'You've never been adventurous,' I complained. 'So how would you know?'

'Because everyone around me is old and all of us are the same,' she replied. 'We're letting our passports lapse and surrendering our driving licences.'

'God, how depressing.'

'You can find pleasure in smaller things, you know, Kat. It's rather lovely being a homebody. You'll see.'

No, I won't see. For me, life is what happens beyond my front door. It's a packed suitcase and a purse full of foreign currency. I'm not saying that I don't feel older. My left hip hurts a bit, I need reading glasses and if I didn't make a monthly visit to the hairdresser there would be much more grey in my hair than brown. I can see the signs all right. But I've made myself a promise – even if I live till I'm a hundred I'll never be a homebody.

I'm planning for things to get more interesting as I get older, not less. I won't be wasting time. And I'm not going to be jealous of my own life. Not ever.

## I

Kat Black hadn't been sure if she should admit to being fifty. People pigeonholed you, didn't they? Perhaps she could gloss over her exact age and let everyone assume she was still in her forties. But then the 'twenty good years' line wouldn't work; and her mum actually had said that; and Kat had been rattled, just as she had written. Besides, it was a great first chapter and she didn't want to change it.

What was the point anyway, her age was already beginning to make a difference. Wasn't it the reason the network hadn't been interested in another series of her travel and food show *Black of Beyond*? Perhaps it was even why her publishers had halved the advance for her new book? Her agent claimed the same thing was happening to everyone, but Kat hadn't been convinced. It seemed more likely that her career was contracting. She had worked so hard and achieved so much but she could smell change in the air.

She stared through the window. From here she couldn't see much unless she opened it up and leaned out. The guest suites in the Hotel Gondola boasted all the best views. The room Kat lived in was up a steep staircase, beneath the eaves, and looked out towards the window of the hotel opposite. Still she loved it here, right in the centre of Venice, all its life humming around her. This was such a different city to live in than to visit. Everything was different now; that was the whole point of coming.

Kat stared at her computer screen, checked the word count and sighed. The beginning of a book was always the hardest part, and this one was going to be even trickier, because she

was living the adventure as she was writing it.

*A Year at Hotel Gondola*; she had been surprised how much her publishers liked the idea. She'd had to promise recipes, of course, which were always hard work, with all the testing required and making sure she measured things down to the last teaspoon. It wasn't the way Kat preferred to cook but she could tell it was going to be a deal-breaker.

'This is going to be my biggest adventure yet,' she had promised when she was pitching the concept. 'Kat Black experiences the one journey she has never taken before – a relationship.'

It wasn't strictly true. She'd had plenty of boyfriends, but the longest Kat had managed to stick with one was eight months, and he was a photographer who travelled almost as much as she did, so it hardly counted as a proper relationship. She and Massimo Morosini, though; that was different; at least it had better be because there was so much more at stake this time.

Kat closed her laptop, stretched her arms and yawned. Perhaps if she took a walk it would clear her head. She needed to explain how she had ended up at Hotel Gondola and wasn't sure how best to tell the story. Massimo's mother would read this book and so would her own. Some of those ex-boyfriends might pick it up, and hopefully thousands of strangers would buy it. All those eyes turned towards her personal life. Sometimes Kat wondered why she'd ever thought it was such a great idea.

Cramming her laptop into her bag, Kat found sunglasses and a hat. She was cautious as she opened the door to her room, stopping and listening before setting a foot outside. The hotel was full of guests and on no account did she want to meet any of them. There were always questions to answer, problems to solve. They needed directions to the Lido or an extra pillow or ideas for where to eat that night. So Kat had taken to creeping out of her room, then taking



the stairs as quickly as possible, head down, sunglasses on, hat brim pulled low. If she could get through the reception foyer without being stopped then she was almost in the clear, but she never fully relaxed until, turning off the quiet *fondamenta*, she knew the Hotel Gondola was out of sight.

Kat had only been in Venice for a short while but already she had found places she was starting to think of as her own. In search of tall, leafy trees she often walked to the Papadopoli Gardens. Even now she still got lost on her way; it only took one wrong turn, one moment of distraction. But those were the times she would stumble across some hidden spot she had heard about but never managed to find before. The little *osteria* with the handwritten menu, the bar where they served paper cones of hot fried polenta, the family-run restaurant that was always full of locals. Massimo kept telling her half the joy of Venice was discovering its secrets for herself. But this was his city; he'd been walking through it most of his life, and often had reasons not to join Kat on her daily strolls – too much work, too many commitments. So she explored alone, the way she always had.

Today Massimo was in his cubby of an office, frowning at spreadsheets filled with numbers. He owned and managed the Hotel Gondola and took his work seriously. Kat was meant to be working too; the weight of the laptop in her bag was a reminder of that. But she had never been good at thinking while she was sitting at her desk. Besides, she had a whole year ahead of her to finish this book and surely it was better to be out experiencing things, finding colour and adventure to fill it with, so she could bring Venice alive for people, make them feel as if they were actually here as they read her words.

A year in this watery, shadowy city; learning to be Venetian, to eat and love like them. When Kat had dreamed up the idea it seemed the answer to her problems. Now she wondered if all she had done was create a whole lot more. A book to conjure out of nothing was one thing; a relationship

to negotiate quite another – particularly as she and Massimo were so new to one another.

‘Excuse me, excuse me.’

Kat turned at the sound of the English voice and recognised the woman speaking as a guest from the Hotel Gondola. She had noticed her earlier in the reception area, sitting beneath the chandelier, puzzling over her guidebook.

‘Are you OK?’ the woman wondered.

‘Yes, why?’ asked Kat, a little too abruptly.

‘I’m sorry. There was something about your expression.’ The woman removed her sunglasses and gazed at Kat with bluish-grey eyes. ‘I thought it was best to check there was nothing wrong. It’s easier not to but then I always regret it. And I recognised you from the hotel. My name is Ruth Wilson. I’ve been with you a week and I’m staying for three more.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Kat tried to sound warmer because Massimo had told her the long-stay guests, the ones that tended to come back year after year, were like gold dust.

‘I’m a fan of yours, actually,’ the woman continued. ‘I’ve watched your show on TV for years. It was one of the things that made me excited about travelling again after my husband died.’

‘Oh, thank you, I hope you’re having a great holiday.’

Kat began to edge sideways but the women seemed not to understand this was a signal for the conversation to end.

‘I’m here to paint,’ she explained, ‘but I haven’t even unpacked my canvases yet. I’m getting a feel for the place. I want to portray it in a way that goes beyond the clichés.’

‘Difficult with Venice, so many other artists have been here before you,’ Kat pointed out.

‘Yes, but I’m not here to paint the canals and gondolas. It’s the people I’m interested in.’

‘Ah, well, there’s no shortage of them. But I suppose you want to paint Venetians rather than tourists?’



‘I’m not sure yet. I was wandering around trying to decide when I spotted you.’ The woman’s eyes searched her face again, as if there might be an answer there. ‘I’ve been hoping to talk to you but you always seem in such a rush when I see you in the hotel.’

This woman was lonely, that much was clear. As tempting as it was to walk away from her, Kat couldn’t do it. Venice seemed such a terrible place to be alone, so colonised by honeymooners and noisy groups, so prone to sudden mists and gloomy afternoons, so filled with faded grandeur.

‘Would you like to join me?’ she made herself ask. ‘I’m heading over to the Papadopoli Gardens.’

‘Oh I love gardens. Are they pretty?’ Ruth sounded eager.

‘It’s a nice park, nothing amazingly special, but I find it’s a good place to go when I need to think about the book I’m trying to write.’

‘I suppose you won’t be able to think properly if I’m there chattering away, will you?’

Kat murmured something noncommittal but it was enough to encourage Ruth.

‘Still, if you’re sure, then yes, I’d love to come.’

They walked together, Ruth matching Kat’s long stride, darting round groups of tourists clotting the way, crossing bridges arching over the silty canals, keeping pace with the slow chug of motorboats.

She was a chatterer, just as she had warned. Mostly what she talked about was Kat’s work; the TV shows she had especially liked, the travel books that had inspired her. She mentioned several times what a huge fan she was. Admiration always felt so awkward. It wasn’t the reason Kat sent those things out into the world, to be feted and famous. They were a means to an end, a way of funding the life she wanted. At least they had been up until now.

‘So what’s your new book about?’ asked Ruth. ‘Venice, I’m guessing.’

‘That’s right.’

‘What aspect of it are you focusing on? The history, the cooking ... Oh, I’m sorry, perhaps you’re one of those writers who hates to talk about your work in progress?’

‘There isn’t much to talk about yet,’ Kat admitted. ‘The idea is that I’m going to spend a year here, and I’ll write about the people I meet, the places I visit, the food I eat, that kind of thing.’

‘It sounds like an adventure.’

‘I hope it’s going to be.’

Ruth’s eyes searched Kat’s face again. ‘You know earlier when I asked if everything was all right?’

‘I had a frown on my face? Thinking about the book, I expect.’

‘Actually it was something else. I always find this tricky to explain but when I see people, I see colours.’

Kat was taken aback. This slight, slender woman seemed so ordinary. Her grey hair was neatly cut in a bob, her clothes were practical and her face bore only the lightest trace of make-up. There was nothing in her appearance to suggest she was the type to start talking about seeing colours.

‘I don’t mean an aura,’ Ruth explained hurriedly. ‘It’s more an impression of colour than a halo of light. And it gives me a sense of that person, who they are and how they’re feeling.’

‘So all these people’ – Kat gestured at a tour group heading their way – ‘you’re seeing colours when you look at them?’

‘That’s right. As a child it was a shock when I realised everyone didn’t experience the world the same way.’

‘What colour am I?’ Kat asked.

‘That’s the thing,’ Ruth said hesitantly. ‘Your colour keeps changing. Right now you’re silver. Earlier there was blue swirling around you. And yesterday you rushed past me in reception and left a trail of orange.’

‘Does that not normally happen?’

‘Not really, that’s why I wondered if something was wrong.’

‘Was I a different colour when you watched my TV shows?’

Ruth smiled. ‘It doesn’t work like that for me. It only happens when someone is physically present. I’m sure you’re sceptical, most people are. But I’m not a madwoman, I promise you.’

Kat decided to humour her. ‘So what do you think it means, my changing rainbow?’

‘I don’t know, only how it makes me feel. “Unsettled” seems the best way to describe it.’

‘And I’m still silver, right?’

‘For now.’

Kat laughed. ‘I’m sorry but that’s so weird.’

‘My husband was the most beautiful shade of green,’ Ruth said wistfully. ‘It made me feel calm. And then he got sick and it dirtied to a dull khaki. Nothing the doctors did ever changed it back.’

‘I’m sorry ... You said he died?’

‘Yes, two years ago although he was ill for a long time before. He always used to tell me I should paint the colours I saw. It was after I lost him that I started.’

They were nearing the gardens now. Kat had managed not to take a wrong turn even though she hadn’t been concentrating. ‘Were the two of you together for a long time?’

‘Forty years. We never had children; it was just him and me, a tight little unit. That’s why I’ve been doing so much travelling. It’s easier than being at home.’

Poor Ruth, lonely everywhere she went. Kat was glad she had invited her along even if she did seem quirky.

‘So what made you come to Venice?’ she asked.

‘I visited once many years ago and wondered if it had changed.’

‘And has it?’

‘Not really; not in the ways that matter.’

The Papadopoli Gardens weren’t large; you could stroll

the gravel paths in no time at all. Usually Kat found a bench, not too near the children's play area, and sat for a while listening to the sound of the breeze in the trees and enjoying the relative calm of the place. Today there was Ruth filling the silence with words and no easy way to escape her. Kat wondered how it must feel, to be so lonely. She listened to her long, rambling story of visiting Venice when she was younger, and imagined the stretch of years between then and now, all spent with one man, then left with nothing at the end of it all, just an empty house, an empty life.

'This is my first trip on my own,' Ruth confided. 'I did a couple of organised tours and a river cruise to get my courage up then decided to come to Venice. I suppose you've been here many times?'

'Actually I always avoided it,' Kat told her. 'To me the south has always felt like the real Italy and I assumed Venice was a tourist Disneyland and a bit pointless.'

'What made you change your mind?'

'Chance brought me here,' Kat told her. 'It brought me here then it kind of took over my life. That's what my book is about. The one I'm supposed to be working on right now.'