

# ONE

## The Capitano's Demand

The morning I was summoned to unravel a murder was bright and icy and full of pigeons. They were everywhere as I walked from my home in Dorsoduro, across the Accademia Bridge, through San Marco and past the cafés in the Piazza, where a grey and busy flock kept buzzing a group of Carnival-goers foolish enough to eat their pastries outside.

The Romans feared the owl, Edgar Allan Poe the raven. An old farmer I knew when I was a child in Yorkshire used to claim a robin flying into the house foretold a coming death. Unless it happened in November, in which case you might live. Pigeons, rats with wings, are perhaps too common, too greedy and annoying to be portents of death. In any case, they were late to the party. The corpse was on the slab already, which was why I was making my way across Venice that February day, all too aware of the noisome creatures flapping and pecking around me. It almost felt as if they were cooing a warning: *This is Carnival, icy cold, full of strangers hiding behind masks. Nothing here is real or settled, fixed or safe. Beware.*

Though doubtless that was my imagination. Something about Venice always sparks flights of wild and random thoughts.

My destination lay just beyond the tourist mecca of the Doge's Palace and the great Byzantine basilica that is the city's time-worn heart. The small square of Campo San Zaccaria was, as usual, empty. Few among the crowds milling aimlessly in the piazza around the corner seemed to know what lies along a narrow side alley from

the Riva degli Schiavoni waterfront, with its much-pictured view across the bay of the Bacino San Marco to the stately campanile of San Giorgio Maggiore, marooned on a small island of its own.

There's the charming San Zaccaria church, where early doges remain interred within a dark and atmospheric crypt that often floods with the waters of the lagoon. Appropriately, since three of them were assassinated in the streets around the *campo* by angry mobs and conspirators. Once, the area was home to a group of nuns who, under pressure from the then doge, sold off their nearby orchards so that the state could build the Piazza San Marco. The small seat of worship that remains pre-dates its celebrated basilica neighbour. It's named after Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, murdered by Herod's soldiers during the Massacre of the Innocents, who is supposedly interred in the crypt too. Since he also has tombs in Azerbaijan, Constantinople and Jerusalem, Zaccaria – to give him his Venetian name – seems a well-travelled sort of chap, though to most outsiders he's simply a stop for the vaporetto.

I've spent most of my life dealing with history one way or another. From what I've seen and learned, the past in Venice is much like that elsewhere, fluid, malleable, easily changed to suit the viewpoint of the narrator. Only larger, grander, more ambitious. Remember, always, that in Italian *storia* means both 'history' and 'story'. The gap between truth and fable is slender, sometimes barely visible at all.

San Zaccaria's altar boasts Bellini's *Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints*, one of the city's great masterpieces, as wonderful as it's ignored. Works by Tintoretto, Van Dyck, Palma Vecchio and his great-nephew Il Giovane decorate the chapels and nave walls. I make a lone pilgrimage to those pews from time to time. Just to sit there, an atheist enthralled by visions of paradise and a world of quiet order and settled belief. Though that day all my head was filled with was the rattle of pigeons, shuffling and grunting on the roof.

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**NO SOLITARY VIGIL** IN the belly of San Zaccaria's nave lay in wait that dazzling, bone-chilling morning. My destination was more mundane: the Carabinieri headquarters, a charming old ochre building next to the church, perhaps something clerical at one time. I don't know and I wasn't minded to ask. I've never had many dealings with the police, apart from the one time our Ford Escort was vandalised outside the house in Wimbledon, and a lot of use they were then. But I had been summoned, by a captain it turned out. A woman, mid to late thirties, with the alert, intelligent face of a university lecturer paired with the trim figure, painted nails and perfect hair of a fashionable middle-class Venetian lady. She wore the standard Carabinieri uniform, dark blue with red flashes, cut very neatly it seemed to me, perhaps custom-tailored. The jacket and trousers looked as if they'd come straight from the press of a dry cleaner that morning, and their owner fresh from the beauty salon.

'Signor Clover,' she said in a low and confident tone that was dry but not unfriendly. 'Do take a seat.' There was only one, opposite her desk in a small office, just the two of us, a phone, a computer. It didn't feel like Scotland Yard. 'Thank you for coming.'

'I wasn't aware I had a choice.'

'No,' she said. 'True.'

I hoped I wasn't trembling. I'd been living in Venice for three months. My papers were surely in order after all the many meetings with rubber-stamp-wielding bureaucrats I'd suffered. No need to fear any of the routine hazards that sometimes befall the foreigner in Italy. All the same, something about this woman made me uneasy. My only knowledge – if it could be called that – of police interrogations came from dramas on the TV. They seemed, well, more *dramatic*. This encounter had a close and personal air about it, which somehow made the atmosphere more uncomfortable.

'Capitana . . .' I checked the nameplate on the desk, 'Fabbri.'

That got me a hard, judgemental stare.

‘Capitano. The title describes the job and has nothing to do with gender. I thought your Italian was better than that.’

Valentina Fabbri had a direct and laser-like gaze to compete with that of my late wife. I felt myself wilting beneath it in that stuffy, overheated little room.

‘My Italian was not the problem. It was my comprehension.’

‘Call me Valentina if you find it easier.’

‘I was wondering why you—’

‘Please, Arnold! You surely know. I have a corpse on my hands,’ she said, as if the idea greatly annoyed her. ‘At least in a fridge in the Ospedale Civile. A bloody corpse. That of a famous English historian. A lord.’

‘A knight,’ I pointed out. ‘It’s not the same.’

‘I stand corrected.’

Something that didn’t happen often, judging by the tone of her voice.

‘How may I help?’

‘It’s Carnival. We have our hands full dealing with drunken foreigners in stupid costumes fighting one another and winding up in canals.’

‘That’s what happened, isn’t it? A tragic case of street violence.’

She appeared outraged. ‘Here? In Venice? No! This would appear to have all the hallmarks of murder, foul and deliberate. Yet the only murders we have are those committed in the ridiculous fictions written by foreigners. It’s unthinkable. Unacceptable. This is a city of beauty, art and culture. And of seeing as many tourists as possible pass through Piazzale Roma then leave as quickly as we may dispatch them.’ She leaned forward. ‘Alive.’ A jab of her painted fingernail. ‘Always . . . alive.’

‘A reasonable wish your visitors would applaud, I’m sure.’

‘You and I both understand no local killed your famous historian. You and I both know the answer to this riddle lies in – what do you call it? – your Golden Circuit.’

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‘Gilded Circle.’

‘Exactly. Well, they’ve been in the cells since yesterday. Along with the young American woman who accompanied the fellow here and his son.’

‘I believe Miss Buckley was meant to be his producer.’

‘Meant to be. None of those I hold in custody seems consumed by grief.’

I kept my peace.

‘You don’t seem surprised?’

‘I’m sure they have their reasons.’

‘Precisely! And this is what I would like to understand. Their reasons. The truth of the matter. I am owed it. Luca Volpetti, a man I like and respect, not least because he once stepped out with my cousin, tells me you’re an intelligent, resourceful fellow, and you know them all.’

Thanks for that, Luca, I thought. ‘I know *of* them. Though not the American woman much, or the son.’

She checked some notes in front of her. ‘All the same. You have more experience *of* these people than anyone else. You’re English too. So perhaps you have some insight into the dark maze of their minds that I lack. Volpetti says you’ve been involved in this odd business the dead man had here.’

‘As has he, but—’

‘Let me be perfectly clear. I wish this problem gone. You and I will apply our minds to solving it. Immediately. By this evening I would like the matter resolved.’

I was, by now, expecting the first part. Not the deadline. ‘Don’t murder investigations take much longer than that? I mean . . . forensics? Science? All the things you see on television?’

She groaned in a way that told me the question was preposterous. ‘This is Venice. Carnival time. Not television. I want this settled by tonight. My husband, Franco, runs Il Pagliaccio, the restaurant. The Clown, as you say. Near the Accademia. You know it?’

The fanciest and most expensive hip establishment in the city's most fancy and expensive *sestiere*.

'A touch beyond my budget from what I've heard. Also . . .' I gestured to my clothes. A tweed jacket at least fifteen years old. Beneath that a lumberjack shirt, red tartan, a Christmas present from God knows when. Tattered jeans, a budget supermarket brand. And on the hook behind the door, the duffel coat I'd brought from Wimbledon, a good decade old. 'I never felt I'd pass the dress code.'

'He's experimenting with a new menu this evening. I am duty bound to taste it and tell him what he's got wrong. Seven thirty. By then it would greatly suit me if this case was . . . dealt with.'

'So quickly?'

'I'm an optimist. Aren't you?' She hesitated. Slowly a smile emerged, then vanished seconds later. 'Help me, Arnold. Together let us establish the facts. Then you may join me for dinner. Wear your pyjamas for all I care. Cuisine from the lagoon, every item on the menu. *Risotto di gò*, with the little fishes prised from deep mud. *Moeche*. Soft-shell crabs.' She snapped her fingers. '*Canoce*, the mantis shrimp with claws so fierce they can break your finger. Wine from the best vineyards in the Veneto that would cost you a fortune if you were paying. You like fish and wine? For free?'

Mostly, on my budget, I lived off supermarket takeaways, pizza and an occasional kebab. 'That would be nice.'

'Nice?' She stared at me. 'Then we must get to work and solve this bloody riddle.'

I looked around the small room. There wasn't a sound from outside. The Carabinieri headquarters seemed remarkably relaxed. 'On our own, Capitano?'

'Valentina, I said! On our own. How many people do you think my husband's going to give free food? We can do this. A dead man. A handful of suspects, all of them reluctant to speak a word of truth. A portion of pastry, as you English say.'

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‘A piece of cake.’

‘Speaking of which . . .’ She picked up the phone and rattled off some orders. Very quickly a young man in uniform came in and deposited two cups of strong coffee on the desk along with four tiny shell-like Neapolitan pastries, *sfogliatelle*. ‘These are your favourite, filled with zabaglione.’

‘They are indeed. How . . .?’

‘Volpetti, of course. Think, Arnold. Make connections. Let us pick apart this tale with logic. That’s your calling, or so Luca told me. Now I need your faculties more than ever.’

‘I see.’

‘Start at the beginning. Tell me everything you know. About Marmaduke Godolphin and his Gilded Circle. Why they’re here. How they get on with one another. Let us explore these people with the same incisive intelligence a pathologist friend of mine is using to explore our unfortunate cadaver in the Ospedale Civile.’

The beginning. People always ask for that. Yet I was never entirely sure where stories truly originated. One could usually see the end, and the middle was clear enough. But the seed, the spark that generated them, so often stayed hidden in the shadows of the past, unwilling to make itself known. Or, just as often, distorted by individuals determined to place their own stamp on history and obliterate the marks of others.

Outside I heard church bells chime nine. Pigeons cooed behind their dying toll.

‘I am waiting,’ she muttered as she rapped her scarlet fingernails on the desk.

‘Very well,’ I told her. ‘But I must warn you. This may take a while.’

**WHILE I GENERALLY ADHERE** to Donne’s maxim that each man’s death diminishes me, it must be admitted that some diminish one rather less

than others. Sir Marmaduke Godolphin, a man of barely hidden shallows despite a plethora of academic gongs, a dodgy knighthood and – this surely mattered most – fame as one of Britain’s most-watched TV historians, remains a case in point. Not that I was in any way delighted that one cold February night he should be found floating face down in the grubby waters of the *rio San Tomà*, bewigged and bejewelled, made up like a Renaissance gigolo seeking custom, the costume of a doge around his plump form, a stiletto blade in his chest, his life bleeding away into the foul grey shallows.

Why should I be? Until his final few days in Venice I barely knew the man any more than he and his Gilded Circle of adoring acolytes were conscious of me. Our paths had crossed only in passing at Cambridge, where Godolphin was the glorious academic of the hour, a handsome fellow, popular with the women, especially after the BBC made him the face of their lightweight documentaries on the empires of Greece and Rome and beyond. A few years after I graduated, he ceased to be Marmaduke Godolphin, Professor of Classics, and was transformed into Duke Godolphin, minor pedagogue turned major media star. *Duke on Persia. Duke in the Footsteps of Caesar. Duke Dissects the Tudors.*

Like Roman crowds rushing to the Colosseum for bread and circuses, the public flocked in droves to his breezy, abbreviated retelling of history. I watched with bemusement. It seemed humdrum, pop-documentary stuff, full of dubious theatrical ‘reconstructions’ in which our charismatic chap bestrode the world with aplomb while wearing his trademark denim jacket, safari boots and glittering smile. The accompanying best-selling books only added to his celebrity and fortune. Marmaduke Godolphin was the public face of the past for millions.

I, on the other hand, a decade younger, was a state-aided student from a council house in Rotherham, a commoner with a stutter and a northern accent to boot, far too impoverished and, more importantly, proletarian to join his glittering clique. Not for me Eton and a family



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lineage traced back to the Norman Conquest, certain destiny for Oxbridge and future eminence. Instead, I was headed for a 2:1 in history and English, which, in the early 1980s would serve as an entry point into the quiet and anonymous world of a professional archivist, first at the Historical Manuscripts Commission, then, when we merged with the Public Records Office, the National Archives at Kew.

Duke Godolphin built his dazzling career through the time-honoured English means of an upper-class chumocracy. As he worked his way from studio to studio and bed to bed across the fragrant media landscape of London, my working day was spent in the suburbs, deep in volumes of correspondence concerning British foreign affairs, from the private diplomatic dispatches of the Plantagenets to the secret files of foreigners in the employ of our spymasters from Elizabeth through Victoria.

As a young man I sometimes dreamed of advancement, though primarily because I relished the idea of one day receiving the title 'Keeper of the Public Records'. 'Keeper of the National Archives' did not, for some reason, possess quite the same ring. In any case, when annual assessments arrived I was invariably informed that while diligent and insightful as a practical archivist, Arnold Clover, loyal servant to the institution all his adult life, lacked the leadership qualities that were, it seemed, more important. The stutter, while now only occasional, doubtless didn't help any more than my inability to shake off my Yorkshire twang.

By the time I approached retirement, Marmaduke Godolphin was a very visible knight of the realm, forever on the box and radio, venting loudly on everything from current affairs to history, morals and religion. A self-declared polymath, a braying controversialist willing to spout on everything from capital punishment to cancel culture for any newspaper, TV show or radio programme that sought his forcefully expressed opinions.

The TV work had become less frequent over the years, perhaps

because of changing tastes. Godolphin was 'old guard', and proud of it, a chap who appealed to an aged audience fond of hearing reassuring tales about the greatness of England's past. In his mind, it seemed, he was a populist, odd given his lineage, wealth and clear distaste for any he regarded as *hoi polloi*. While rumours of his fevered love life found their way into the tabloid gossip columns from time to time, he remained, on paper at least, happily married to Felicity, a former student turned senior producer at the BBC. The woman who gave him a leg-up in his TV career, turning him from one more talking head into the star of his eponymous series.

By now in his mid seventies but as energetic as ever, he was a man to be reckoned with, holding board positions in industry and public bodies open only to that exclusive English cabal known as the Great and the Good. A sure thing for the House of Lords, one might have thought, if the swirls of rumour about his private life and occasional lapse into dubious financial transactions hadn't snatched away the ermine at the last moment. Or perhaps he'd just never got around to bunging the right politicians. It doubtless rarely concerned him. He was a man of substance, with a son, Jolyon – no ordinary names for the Godolphins – who'd taken on the mantle of television historian in his stead. In the odd way the British have at times, his admirers continued to love his progression from television academic to national pundit, a raffish character who liked to portray himself as a loyal and patriotic Englishman brave enough to say what others never dared. He was the 'voice of the people', not that he'd deign to spend a moment in their company unless it was to scrawl a quick signature on a book of his they'd bought before rushing off to feast and drink and argue in the Garrick.

I, meanwhile, was about to end forty mostly happy years wreathed in the daily ritual of paper and parchment, wax and ink. One never tires of the delights of ancient documents. The smell, the soft feel of old vellum, the visual pleasure of so many kinds of calligraphy and

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printing, the stains of age, of wear and fire. Above all, the realisation that so many hands – the touch of monarchs, statesmen, archbishops and all the many homicidal monsters among them – held these same frail pages before.

Even now, from Venice, I miss the intimate pleasure of picking up those precious documents in the quiet corners of Kew, though long before I left it was apparent that the days of holding them in your hands were numbered. The horrors of digitisation were upon us. Soon, the perpetually enthusiastic young of the IT department predicted, we'd never again need to recover an ancient item from its home among Kew's sliding double cabinets. Except for the documentaries made by the likes of Jolyon Godolphin, following in the footsteps of his father, and then they'd probably get some underpaid actor to do the work. A keyword, even a snatch of metadata, was all that was needed to retrieve a scan from the data store. Not the skill and cunning of a professional archivist built up over decades, an expert – that derided calling – who knew where to look and what document connected with another, sometimes far away among those serried ranks of files.

The creation of an interdependence of descriptors, a few my own, mostly those of others, many long dead. That was what my job entailed. Building a web of reliable links throughout the vast store of material in our care, making items, some deeply obscure, available to those who needed them even though our customers usually arrived on our doorstep with only the vaguest idea of what, in truth, they sought. An archivist maintains an entire library in the mind, shelf upon shelf, reference upon reference, page upon page. I can still close my eyes and see the whole of the foreign affairs section of Kew, tracing mental lines from the Field of Gold to the Raj, Lepanto through to World War Two.

I met my beloved Eleanor over a seemingly anonymous account of Agincourt, which she, being infinitely brighter, spotted immediately was a rough crib from Holinshed. At the time she was the lowest level of archivist, and in the way of public institutions, it was a position

from which she never much progressed. The one sop they gave her was foreign liaison, so the two of us would make the odd trip to the great libraries of Europe, Eleanor on business, me occasionally tagging along as a happy traveller paying my own way. Always appreciated, never promoted, that was my wife's fate, doubtless because she had a forthright manner and didn't suffer fools in any sense, least of all gladly. We were married within the year, rarely well off on our civil service salaries, not that it mattered. She was a woman of sound sense when it came to life in general and money in particular. Especially for planning for the future we'd build for ourselves once the daily round of work in Kew was over.

There were no children – an accident we learned to accept. No close relatives or domestic ties. A move abroad in retirement seemed not just sensible but inevitable. We were firm Europhiles who loved to travel on our modest budget, by train whenever we could since you saw so much more.

We learned Italian at night school, she more quickly, naturally. Before long, the two of us began to make research trips to search out suitable destinations. After rejecting Rome as chaotically expensive and Florence as too touristy, we settled upon a modest cul-de-sac at the edge of Dorsoduro in Venice as the place we'd spend our mutual, loving dotage. With our savings and the proceeds of our terraced house in Wimbledon, we could, she assured me, afford a compact one-bedroom ground-floor flat in a quiet area away from the crowds, live off our pensions and explore all the delights Italy had to offer.

Eleanor had never been happier.

It felt as if we were walking through a dream.

We were.

**THREE DAYS BEFORE OUR** joint retirement party, seven weeks from taking possession of the ground-floor flat she'd found around the corner

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from San Pantalon, Eleanor collapsed at home. The sound of her falling to the floor was terrible, so loud, so heavy, I'll never forget it. I found her at the foot of the stairs, gasping, eyes glazed, mouth flapping for a second or two, and then, as I struggled to think what to do, what to say, what to think, she fell silent. In outright panic I called an ambulance, but she was dead already and I knew it. A heart attack, the consultant said, a pre-existing condition. She'd been making occasional visits to the hospital, more than I knew about, it appeared. A minor ailment, she always said. Nothing that need worry me. It was only later that I discovered the doctors had warned her months before that she was suffering from a cardiovascular condition that was dangerous and untreatable. Had I known that, we'd never have sold the house, never have contemplated fleeing cold and bitter England for the paradise we thought awaited us in Italy. As Eleanor doubtless understood.

There was a cremation: a few colleagues from Kew, one distant cousin I'd never heard of who turned up in the hope there might be something in the will. As if. Before I knew it, still in a blur, I was on a plane to Marco Polo airport and a life that was new in ways I'd never wanted. It's not as if I had much choice. The contract on the tiny flat was signed; inescapable, the Venetian estate agent said, except at great cost. Just as importantly, we'd sold the Wimbledon house to a lovely young couple who would have been heartbroken if I'd pulled out. There was sufficient hurt in my life at that moment; I'd no wish to spread it around. Besides, what was left for me in England?

Those first few weeks remain hazy as I struggled to cope with my loss and a strange new home. Shopping and bureaucracy baffled me, as did the accent, so different from night school in Wimbledon. The Venetians are often characterised as cold and unwelcoming to strangers unless you come bearing money. This is unfair and mistakes cautious reticence for rudeness and being offhand. Since my Italian was passable – even though I was occasionally scolded for speaking 'like a Roman' – I conversed easily in shops and cafés. Soon I established a

regular round of places to visit for coffee, the occasional drink and cheap lunch, and before long found myself being acknowledged as a regular. A resident foreigner, not a tourist. The distinction was important.

As life began to settle, an old friend from Kew emailed me with news from home and an early Christmas present so generous and apposite I stared at his message in tears. He'd used his connections to cadge free reader tickets for all the main libraries of the city – the vast shelves of the Marciana; the unique and somewhat eccentric Querini Stampalia, a historic palace with a more modern element courtesy of Carlo Scarpa; the Fondazione Giorgio Cini on San Giorgio Maggiore. Even a small museum dedicated to the history of the Lido on the other side of the lagoon.

Best of all, I was provided with unrestricted access to the State Archives of Venice, housed for the most part in the former convent annexed for the purpose by Napoleon. It was next to the great basilica of the Frari, no more than a two-minute walk from my little home. More than seventy kilometres of shelving in all, along with its satellite buildings, rich with original documents that dated as far back as the seventh century. So many of them that some remain unread for many a long year. Heaven for the likes of me. A home from home. Paradise regained.

The staff there warmed to me once I explained my background in Kew, Luca Volpetti, a charming senior archivist who lived on the Lido, most of all. Venetian born and bred, he was a bachelor who knew every bar, café and local restaurant and soon took me under his wing. Luca showed me corners of the city few outsiders knew existed, wondrous palazzi open only to those invited through their doors, tiny societies dedicated to music, books and the arts. And on a practical level, since he was also a fellow fond of the table, where to eat wonderfully for a pittance.

With his encouragement, I became a volunteer at the State Archives, showing round the occasional English visitor – it was not a place that sold itself to the public – and on occasion helping with advice on how

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we might have approached some of the daunting collection issues the Archives faced had we been in the more egalitarian location of Kew, rather than the grand if faded former home of a minor order of friars. As the year turned, I found I rarely thought of England, an angry, distant place, much at all.

Yet England was to find me.

**THE COUNTDOWN TO THE** strange demise of Marmaduke Godolphin began with Luca Volpetti on a February Thursday during Carnival. This was my first experience of the seasonal festival that is, next to the Biennale, probably the city's most famous event. In the tourist areas of the city, visitors were wandering around in masks and costumes, most traditional, some deliberately exaggerated, a few quite bizarre. It never seemed to occur to many newcomers that northern Italy by the Adriatic might be cold. As a result, a good few turned up in flimsy summer outfits and soon found themselves shivering at night when the temperature rarely rose much above freezing. I was determined not to be sniffy about fleeting tourists, however ignorant, noisy and annoying they were at times. They brought money into the city then swiftly left. Both, it seemed to me, were welcome.

Luca had called me at home and, with an air of enthusiastic mystery in his voice, suggested we meet for lunch somewhere there'd be none of that sartorial nonsense: the Osteria Ai Pugni, a discreet little bar near Campo San Barnaba, popular with locals, especially staff from Ca' Foscari, the nearby university. All around were tourist traps where a plate of simple spaghetti might cost fifteen euros or more. In the cramped tables at the back of the Pugni, the knowledgeable could find a range of pasta dishes changing daily for half that, and a good glass of Veneto wine for a pittance.

For once my new friend was late. When he bustled through the door, black *tabarro* cape flying, he was gasping for breath.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked as the waitress delivered my plate of winter radicchio, gorgonzola and walnut pasta along with a glass of red.

‘I fear not. I am excited. Overexcited. Normally I’m the most unflappable of creatures, as you know.’ This was not even close to the truth. ‘It’s worrying in our line of work, isn’t it?’

‘Rare, I would have said. Uncomfortable. Perhaps unwelcome. Wine will help.’

‘No ordinary wine. Anna!’ He called the manager over. ‘A bottle of Prosecco for Arnold and me if you will. The Vigne di Alice.’

She was a smart young woman who always looked after us on our regular visits. ‘The Vigne’s twenty-seven euros, Luca. Have you won the lottery?’

He thought for a moment, frowned and ordered a radicchio pasta just like mine. The dark red chicory came from Sant’Erasmo, Venice’s vegetable island. It was bound to be superb.

A dapper dresser as well as a man of great charm and a sweet and cheery temper, that day Luca was wrapped in his dashing cape, a silver clasp at the neck, an arty floppy hat against the winter cold and a scarf so long it reminded me of a far-off Doctor Who. All of which he deposited on the adjoining seat with a flourish that said, ‘Now down to business.’

While coveting the bachelor life, he made no secret of the fact that he was friend and lover to two lady professors at Ca’ Foscari, one of them married, the second widowed, both aware of each other and quite content with the arrangement. As, it seemed, was the husband, who was an occasional visitor to the widowed professor among other ladies in town. Venice was quite different to Wimbledon, at least the Wimbledon I knew.

‘Not in the sense you mean,’ he told Anna. ‘But yes. I have won the lottery in a way.’ He smiled across the table and took my hand. ‘So has our friend from England. You’ll never guess what I have a sniff of now. It is the most amazing discovery ever, Arnold. Simply



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stupendous! Come. We eat. We drink. Then I give you your homework. After that, tomorrow, you meet a great countryman of yours. Sir Marmaduke Godolphin.'

The name left me quite flabbergasted, and I said so, in English, which only left him confused.

'I do not know this word. What is the meaning of "flabber"? Or the verb "to gast"?''

'Rather surprised,' was all I could suggest in its place.

'He is a knight, Arnold. On the TV. You are familiar with him?'

'A little. We were at Cambridge at the same time, though I doubt he noticed me. I was a humble student under the wing of someone he despised; Godolphin was a starry professor. I'd say I know of him mostly. He hasn't been on the TV so much of late. At least not fronting a history series. Mostly political stuff. Opinion pieces. A talking head. A bellowing head, if I'm honest. That kind of thing.'

'Well, it's history he's after now.' The Prosecco arrived with his food. Anna poured us two glasses. 'The fellow's coming to Venice with a great project in his head. An extraordinary discovery lies ahead of us.'

He chinked his glass against mine in a toast. Together we took a sip of the most expensive wine I'd tried since arriving. It was a distinct cut above the ordinary: dry, perfectly chilled, not too fizzy. He glowed with pleasure, then stabbed the deep red chicory and cheese on his plate. 'We are to host a meeting of starry academics. Some of the most famous names in the field. All assembled to hear Godolphin's discovery.'

'His discovery?'

'An amazing one, or so the man says. And you are mistaken, my friend. He does remember you.' He raised his glass in a toast. 'The fellow requested your assistance in person.'

I was briefly lost for words. Then I asked, 'What discovery is this?'

'That would be telling.'

'It would indeed, Luca. So . . . do.'

His arms flew about the way they often did. 'I don't know beyond a few morsels he's let escape! He's keeping his cards remarkably close to his chest, as you say. His secret remains a secret until he reveals it. And to his former pupils too, I imagine. Since they are the illustrious authorities he's summoned for the occasion.'

I thought back to Cambridge all those years before. The Gilded Circle. Godolphin's chosen ones. They were inseparable, always following him around the college and the faculty like tame puppies. His magic had rubbed off too. Their careers had flourished around the world, though none to the extent of his. 'I don't suppose by any chance they might be called Caroline Fitzroy, Bernard Hauptmann and George Bourne?'

Luca stared at me in awe. 'How did you know?'

'I guessed. A dreadful habit in an archivist, I imagine.'

'Pah.' He waved a hand and took a second sip. 'I guess all the time and never tell them. We all do. Let's not pretend. Yes. Those three.'

'And his wife? Felicity?'

His eyes narrowed. 'The fact that a man should come to Venice in the company of his wife is not *so* unusual. That is not a guess at all.'

I'd vaguely followed their careers. Felicity, of course, had married her old tutor and helped propel his career upwards in the world of broadcasting. Caroline had joined the Sorbonne. Hauptmann, the American, was another to choose the safety of academic tenure, at Harvard. George Bourne, the most congenial of the lot, if I recalled correctly, bumbled his way into publishing and seemed to labour with a middling career until he took on Marmaduke Godolphin's TV tie-ins. On the back of Felicity's felicitous promotion of her husband's many series, Bourne's star rose too, with Godolphin's pop offerings selling as Christmas titles on a regular basis. It's not just archivists who build and maintain their links, you see. As a result of such commercial success with his former professor, Bourne now held a senior position and a fancy title with one of the big international companies.

## THE MEDICI MURDERS

'I glimpsed them at Cambridge when I was there,' I said. 'The whole gang seemed awfully close, a clique. How much of that was genuine affection and how much ambition I've no idea. The successful tend to stick together even when they come to hate one another. I can't say I'm terribly surprised to discover they're still at it forty years on.'

'Hmm.' Luca didn't seem to know how to take that.

'I'm an archivist, I will always be an archivist. I seek connections everywhere. As do you. I may be retired, but you can't stifle the habits of a lifetime.'

'Good!' He opened his leather valise, a battered old thing, quite fetching in its decay. 'We will need your habits. I have my orders from Godolphin. Yours too. And before you ask . . . yes, we will be paid. Three hundred euros a day each, a minimum of five days, in cash. I talked him up from a hundred. Told him our time was precious, which it is. I hope you agree.'

More money than I'd made daily in my life. Godolphin must have had his fingers in some precious pie. 'For what exactly?'

He retrieved two books from his case and spread them out on the table amidst the plates and glasses. Histories both, about the Medici. 'For doing what people like us do. Panning for historical gold. Godolphin has uncovered a collection of material that is on its way here now. He has good reason to believe that there are two items hidden somewhere within it of immense interest and importance. Revelations that will change the way we see history. Or at least a vital part of it.'

'What kind of items? What part?'

He sipped his fizz and smiled. 'I've no idea. The fonds first, the discovery after. You know the routine.'

Fonds. There was a word I hadn't heard in a while. In archival terms it stands for the broadest form of a catalogue, the top level, usually the person or institution from which the records came, later to be sorted into series of related records, then files, which are numerous

items relating to a single subject, and finally the individual document itself.

Imagine. A trolley load of boxes containing the correspondence of a monarch. A fonds.

The boxes that pertain to a particular year. A series.

The collection in that year that covers correspondence with his prime minister. A file.

A single letter expressing his displeasure about something or other. An item.

Fonds → Series → Files → Items.

There's much more to cataloguing than that, of course, but this is the heart of the process.

'What fonds?' I asked.

Luca raised his glass in a toast again.

'A set of previously unseen state papers belonging to Gian Gastone de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. The last of his line.'

The idea seemed incredible. 'Surely everything about the Medici is known and filed in Florence already? Where on earth would a man like Marmaduke Godolphin—'

His hands started flapping again, so wildly he almost hit the woman on the table behind him. 'I don't know, and I don't care! He says he has acquired the items by private means. They're being placed in a locked room in the Archives shortly. Everything is quite undocumented. Untouched, it seems, since that last, sad Medici expired fat and drunk in the pit of his bed. Godolphin is convinced there's real gold in there. It's our job to mine for it.'

'When did Gian Gastone die?'

He pulled out a small notepad he kept with him constantly and checked. 'July the seventh, 1737.'

Anna, always an observant presence behind the bar, noticed that a sudden silence had descended. She came and cleared away the plates as we ordered coffee.

## THE MEDICI MURDERS

‘Some state documents of the last Duke of Tuscany have lain untouched for three hundred years?’ I said. ‘And now they’re in the possession of Marmaduke Godolphin?’

‘Correct,’ Luca replied while making sure he didn’t look me in the eye.

‘Why can’t he find what he wants for himself?’

He made that gesture the Italians love so much, a frown with corners of the mouth downturned and a little shrug of the shoulders. ‘Perhaps he thinks it’s beneath a great man like him. Sorting through piles of dirty and dusty papers. Or the discovery will appear more theatrically significant if it’s made by the likes of us on his instructions. One step at a time. First, we must work. The treasure trove he’s delivered is not so large, it seems. All we need to find is the two items that interest him. As well as the money, our prize is that he’ll donate the entire collection to the Archives. Imagine!’ He chuckled. ‘The academic opportunities apart . . . Florence will be furious!’

There was an old rivalry that had survived the centuries.

‘And for him?’ Marmaduke Godolphin had surely never performed a selfless act in his life.

‘A TV series? The chance to revive his career if, as you say, it’s been quiet of late? Yet more fame? Money? I don’t know. Who cares? This is fun, my English friend. This is what we’re made for. Finding things ordinary mortals miss. With a tidy reward to boot. But first . . .’ He pushed the books across the table, ‘we must, he says, read. And read. And read.’

‘About what?’

He opened the nearest book and stabbed his finger on a copperplate engraving that filled the page. It portrayed a struggle, a desperate one, two men at each other’s throats, daggers in hand, fighting for their lives. ‘About cut-throats. Killers. Assassins, near and far.’