

One

The Cursed Palazzo

Venice is never short of stories. Every street has a tale to tell, every stone a ghost. This one began with a face at a first-floor window. A young fellow, pale, stubbly features, gaunt, startled to be seen even for a fleeting second as he dashed away, vanishing behind the cracked and dusty tracery glass. Perhaps a spectre, a phantom, so a few of those around me might have thought. Or just my imagination, sparked by the curious day and the even more curious palazzo where I'd found myself.

Ca' Scacchi was supposed to be abandoned, not a soul living there for the best part of thirty-five years. It looked the part. An eccentric, crooked palace on the Grand Canal in Dorsoduro, between the Guggenheim and Salute, that I'd passed countless times on the vaporetto and always found a fascinating sight. Most other palazzi along this privileged stretch were private mansions, galleries, museums or hotels, smart, expensive, part of the international aspect of Venice that rarely interested me. Not this one. It was narrower than the rest and set at an angle that the city surveyors had begun to find alarming. There was a water gate on the ground floor, leading, I assumed, to the usual storage area customary in fifteenth-century palaces of its type. Above was the *piano nobile*, with long, dusty windows and a balcony. Over that stood another floor, almost as tall, though the windows there were tightly shuttered. Then a final, more modest top level, a place for domestic staff.

Circular glass ornamental windows were spaced along the facade like dead, blind eyes. Three funnel chimneys sat on the shallow terracotta-tiled roof, one of them decidedly wonky. The middle of the front was decorated with marble, pale pink geometric shapes. They framed the fading remains of decorative mosaics depicting a man and woman in medieval costume

seated at a chessboard, something that always brought out the cameras among passing tourists. Though how many understood that *scacchi* is Italian for chess, or that, according to the history books, there was supposedly a life-size ‘board’ for matches with human players in the courtyard behind, I’d no idea. The only ugly element was a black and rusty iron balcony protruding from the second floor on the left, an early nineteenth-century addition that Ruskin had described in vitriolic terms.

Being unusually ornate and somewhat smaller than the grand buildings around, the place stood out, appearing to my uninformed eyes quaint, eccentric, the dream of an imaginative child gifted a collection of Renaissance Lego. While I always found Ca’ Scacchi raised a puzzled smile and my spirits, most Venetians felt very differently and weren’t reluctant to say so. The palace, you see, was cursed. Originally built for a city official under the Doge Giovanni Mocenigo, it had cast a dark and bloody shadow on many who’d come to live beneath its funnel chimneys over half a millennium. Bankruptcies, suicides, unexplained disappearances and at least two murders ran through its five-century history. Brave souls who’d wandered down the narrow dead-end alley that led to its Grand Canal side complained of tormented howls coming from within, spectral apparitions, the rank smell of rotting corpses from time to time, and a sudden chill in temperature even at the height of summer. So many stories had come to gather over the years that it almost appeared a relative to the notorious island of Poveglia across the lagoon, an equally hellish, tormented spot according to local lore. Though a couple of Venetians I knew who’d sailed there once and spent the night in a tent said it was a peaceful spot, undeserving of its reputation.

Ca’ Scacchi had remained in the ownership of the family of the same name throughout, sometimes occupied by them, on occasion briefly leased to tenants. Mostly those who paid the Scacchi rent were foreign and ignorant of the palace’s history and reputation until they moved in and, perhaps prompted by neighbourhood gossip, began to complain of ghostly visitations, mysterious sounds, odd illnesses and a prevailing atmosphere

of doom and depression. When the Scacchis' fortunes began to wane in the 1970s, the palazzo went on the market with an international real estate agent for a while. A Hollywood star, a cinema action hero, who saw it during the film festival almost fell for the agent's patter and stumped up several million dollars, only to pull out after hearing hair-raising stories from a famous Italian director.

After that, the House of Scacchi was visited by tragedy again. The financier father and his wife died when their light aircraft crashed in the Dolomites after taking off from the little Nicelli airfield on the Lido. Another suicide, the authorities suspected, since the weather was fine, the plane was old but in airworthy condition and, when the bankers came to look at the books, the accounts were mired in debt.

Only the infamous tiny palazzo on the Grand Canal remained, after that home to the last Scacchi, a young contessa of a marked and intense beauty, who fell into an odd marriage with an English music mogul from a council house in London's East End. Then, five years later, she vanished too, leaving behind a distraught husband and a young child.

The daughter, Lizzie Hawker, had taken her father's name, not her mother's, and certainly wasn't interested in being called a countess as was her right. She'd made that clear already. Now she stood next to me as if I was the only friend she had in Venice, perhaps the world. Ca' Scacchi, a dusty empty shell for nearly four decades, was to be opened up to the prying eyes of bureaucracy through a court order that would allow the city council to assess its structural integrity.

Like explorers attracted to a newly discovered cavern promising unknown treasures, a motley group had gathered for the occasion. Luca Volpetti, my good friend from the Venice State Archives, had been summoned to check whether there were precious items inside the palazzo that needed to be taken into public care for conservation. He stood to one side, sweating in his pale linen summer suit, crossing himself and slyly making the sign of the horns, a superstitious spell against evil, with a hand behind his back. He wasn't the only one. Even Luigi Ballarin, the city surveyor who had instigated the forced inspection, had discreetly made the same gesture as we walked down

the dark alley by the side to assemble in front of the locked iron door that led into the premises.

In the shade of the high palace wall, the heat remained intense. Clouds of black midges hovered in the heavy high summer air. The sound of passing boats large and small echoed off the stained brickwork, along with the occasional cry of a gondolier. Valentina Fabbri, Capitano of the Carabinieri, had arrived with four uniformed officers. They were keeping back a small group of reporters and photographers, making them wait in the main street that ran towards the Guggenheim. One I recognised: Alf Lascelles, an English hack, an upper-class fop of a man who'd caused me no end of grief before.

'Arnold! Arnold!' he cried. 'A word in your shell-like, if I may.'

Lascelles had a direct line into the worst of English tabloids. The last thing Lizzie Hawker needed at that moment. I was minded to turn my back on him, but that rarely worked with his type.

I stepped over. 'There's nothing for you here.'

'Not yet maybe.' He tapped his nose, a man of predictable gestures always. 'But it's coming. I can smell it.'

It was tempting to tell the fellow to bugger off. But he must have heard that a million times, to no avail.

'Arnold?' It was Lizzie.

'Your pretty young boss wants you, Clover,' Lascelles said with a charmless grin. 'Remember what I said?'

I went back to the gathering by the door.

'All this fuss.' Lizzie had a pleasant, steady voice, mildly estuarial with a slightly exotic inflection, perhaps a trace of her Italian heritage on show. 'What on earth do they think is about to happen? Ghosts and ghoulies flying out of the brickwork?'

'I've no idea. But I thought I saw—'

'Oh,' she snapped, glaring at someone striding down the passageway. 'Not him again.'

Enzo Canale. A man I'd known only by reputation until I came on board what I had come to regard as 'the Scacchi case' the week before. Canale was rarely out of the local papers. One of the wealthiest local figures in the city, which meant

he was very rich indeed. Owner of hotels and restaurants, a gallery, retail property in San Marco and one café in the piazza itself. A society man about town with that rather dated sense of style a certain kind of mature Italian male deems fashionable. Now in his early seventies, he was tall, imposing, hefty, with the face of an ageing *roué*, a quick and artificial smile, teeth too white and perfect to be real, hair a thinning comb-over dyed a uniform shade of black, shiny with grease. There was a navy barathea jacket slung over his left shoulder, sweat marks beneath the arms of his bright pink shirt, heavy sunglasses hiding his demeanour. A fat cigar sat between the stubby fingers of his right hand, a wisp of grey smoke curling round his thick wrist.

'Contessa,' he said with a smile and a nod. 'I trust we're ready to go in.'

'Don't call me that. You're not wanted here.'

That brought a very Italian shrug of his heavy shoulders. 'As I've told you a million times, in reality this property is mine. Your mother wished it so when she offered me that contract before she vanished. Nevertheless, I am prepared to be generous—'

After Alf Lascelles, this was quite enough. 'Signor Canale,' I said, getting myself between the two of them. 'As Miss Hawker has made clear repeatedly, the only conversations she will have on this subject must take place in the presence of lawyers. You can either shut up or I'll have to ask the Carabinieri to make you join the press in the street.'

He took off his sunglasses and looked me up and down, wheezing a little, grinning all the while. It was meant to be intimidating, I imagine, but for the life of me all I could think of was the portly New York extortionist in a white suit who got his comeuppance in *The Godfather* during the festival of San Rocco. A ridiculous comparison, of course, since Canale was no small-time crook but a society figure to be reckoned with. Still, with that image in mind, I found it quite easy to smile back.

Before he could respond, Ballarin, the city surveyor, was over. The two men were clearly close, as we understood from an earlier encounter in the city offices.

'I have every right to be here,' Canale said with a bossy wave of his hand. 'Tell them.'

From the look on his face, I don't think Ballarin enjoyed being treated like one of Canale's lackeys. 'Not now. We can talk later.'

'I'm sure you can,' said Lizzie. 'Don't forget an envelope stuffed with notes.'

I groaned. She was late thirties, a charming woman, quick, intelligent, funny when she wanted to be, rather too candid for her own good. Broke, she said, by way of explaining the fact that she always turned up in ragged, holed jeans and a tatty cheesecloth shirt; not that they failed to suit her. I imagine she got her looks from her Italian mother: dark eyes, dark hair, pale complexion. An eye-catching woman, I knew from the way men looked at the two of us together and seemed to ask themselves: father and daughter? Old man with his young lover? Really? With *him*?

Ballarin scowled, an expression that seemed to fit him well. 'Signora Hawker. I've explained the situation already. We have right of entry. By force if necessary. If you have keys with you, please provide them now, or we will break down that gate.'

Big door. All iron. I wished them luck with that.

There was a noise down the alley. I saw a figure scuttle off towards the street, pushing through the Carabinieri officers there. He glanced back, and it occurred to me that this was the man I'd spotted at the palazzo window. I hadn't imagined it. Someone had been inside the infamous Ca' Scacchi before us. He must surely have clambered over the wall somehow.

'Fine. But not him,' Lizzie said, pointing at Enzo Canale. Then she pulled an ancient ring of keys out of her battered canvas shoulder bag. 'Present from my dad.'

I was still staring after the figure vanishing down the alley when she marched forward, barged her way to the front of the small crowd of workmen with their tools and juggled with the lock.

It took her a while to find the right key. She waved at the men to do the rest. After much cursing, heaving and sweating, the door creaked to one side on ancient, rusty hinges. Then the screeches turned louder, higher, became alive, and were joined

by the shrieks of the men around the portico as they leapt back in horror. Behind the iron barrier was a mound of churned earth, alive with writhing bodies.

Lizzie Hawker stepped daintily to one side of the squealing mob of rats fleeing their home behind the long-abandoned doorway into Ca' Scacchi. As the grey swarm raced towards the sewer gratings and the canal, she turned to Luigi Ballarin and smiled.

'Any damage,' she said, 'is down to you.'

Ferragosto. This was my first experience of the annual midsummer holiday since I'd moved to Venice after my wife's death the previous year. I'd looked up the term the moment I heard it. As always in Italy, ancient history came knocking on the door. It originated as the Feriae Augusti two thousand years ago, in honour of the emperor who donated the holiday to the nation and his name to the month. A break from work in the middle of the hottest part of the summer, a time for rest and parties and horse races, Siena's famous Palio dell'Assunta being a modern relic.

Mussolini, determined to paint himself as a Roman emperor reborn, had revived it as an important part of the annual holiday calendar, three days in the middle of August when factories and businesses closed and ordinary Italians enjoyed time off; subsidised trains to the beach and cultural attractions, a break from the drudgery of work. The habit stuck long after he was killed at the end of the war. Come the middle of August, all across the city, shops, bars and restaurants would shut their doors, owners and staff heading to the cool of the mountains or the seaside. The streets were left to those meant to man the fort, along with meandering swarms of sweaty tourists grumbling about the thirty-degree weather, the price of a gelato and the fact most of the places they'd marked on their must-dine lists were shut.

Luca and my Carabinieri friend Valentina Fabbri apart, pretty much everyone I knew in the city had decamped for the breeze of the sands or the cool of the Dolomites. Valentina's husband, Franco, had shuttered his swanky restaurant, Il Pagliaccio, no more than a two-minute walk from Ca' Scacchi, and headed

off for a boating holiday in Sardinia with their two kids. If she minded being left in Venice, she didn't show it. As I was to learn very soon, the puzzle around Lizzie Hawker's strange legacy of a semi-derelict palazzo played no small part in that.

I'd been wondering whether I ought to catch a bus to somewhere in the Dolomites myself when Valentina called and asked me to help a fellow Brit in something of a sticky position: unable to speak Italian or comprehend the way officialdom worked, on her own in Venice, short of money, in need of a friendly ear. Lizzie offered to pay me ten euros an hour – when she had the money. I wasn't in a rush. After all, when I heard of her predicament, sheer curiosity took over. I remain at heart an inquisitive professional archivist, a seeker after documents and links throughout history. If I had to sit through tedious meetings with lawyers and Enzo Canale, that was a small price to pay for getting past that iron door into the infamous cursed palazzo.

Naturally, I'd no idea what I'd let myself in for. Which tends to be a recurring theme in my life.

Lizzie was five years old when Lucia Scacchi vanished. That, for the moment, was as much as I knew. She seemed unwilling to elaborate, even if there was much more to say, and of that I was unsure. Enzo Canale had lodged a court case claiming that Lucia had entered into negotiations to sell Ca' Scacchi to him. But they were challenged as fraudulent by Lizzie's father, Chas Hawker, who soon entered into a spiral of financial problems and addiction. And, as Lizzie admitted, the one hard piece of information I'd gleaned, there was a further, seemingly intractable problem to do with the title to the palazzo. While there was a general assumption that Lucia Scacchi had killed herself, no proof, no body had ever emerged. As far as the law was concerned, she remained a missing person. Her husband never applied to the courts to have her declared dead, so the property never passed to him. Canale's lawsuit, like pretty much everything else to do with that fetching little building between the Guggenheim and Salute, was trapped in amber, both legal and practical.

And so the palace rotted until Luigi Ballarin saw fit to intervene on behalf of the council. After all, a historic building

like Ca' Scacchi couldn't be allowed to tumble into the Grand Canal. Along with all the rumours about curses, there was intense speculation about what riches the family dynasty had accrued over the years and hidden behind its marble walls. Historically, the Scacchi were much involved in banking and the machinations that led to the rise of the Medici in Florence and the Gonzaga in Mantua, as well as the complex politics that saw the Kingdom of Naples involved in a tug-of-war between the Spanish and the French. Several of its men wore the red hats of Vatican cardinals, one almost gaining the papal tiara at one point, until he was outbribed by a rival supported by the French. Some of its women, almost all famed for their beauty, had married into the finest families in Europe.

It was once one of Italy's most illustrious bloodlines. Now there was just one Scacchi left, a solitary woman with scarcely two pennies to rub together. And she couldn't understand a word of Italian or bear to use the famous family name.