

# 1

It had been a tedious Monday, much of it spent with the written witness statements about a fight between two taxi drivers that had sent one of them to the hospital with concussion and a broken right arm. The statements had been made by the American couple who had asked the concierge of their hotel to call a water taxi to take them to the airport; the concierge, who said he had called one of the taxi drivers the hotel always used; the porter, who said he had done nothing more than his job, which was to put the Americans' luggage into the taxi that had pulled up to the dock; and the two taxi drivers, one of whom had been questioned in the hospital. From what Brunetti could make of the various stories, the driver from the usual company was nearby when he received the call from the concierge, but when he arrived at the hotel, another taxi was docked at the landing. He pulled up, called out the name of the Americans, which the concierge had given him, and said he was to take them to the airport. The other driver said the porter had waved to him

as he was passing, so it was his fare. The porter denied this and insisted he was simply helping with the luggage. The driver into whose taxi the porter had put the luggage had somehow found himself on the deck of the other taxi. The Americans were enraged that they had missed their flight.

Brunetti knew, but could not prove, what had happened: the porter had waved to a passing taxi so that he, instead of the concierge, would get a percentage of the fare. The consequences were evident: no one would tell the truth, and the Americans would not understand what had happened.

As he entertained that thought, Brunetti was momentarily deflected from his desire for a coffee and paused to consider whether he had perhaps stumbled upon some cosmic explanation of current world history. He smiled, making a note to repeat the idea to Paola that evening, or better yet, to tell it the following night, when they were invited to dinner at her parents'. He hoped that the Conte, who appreciated paradox, would be amused. He knew his mother-in-law would be.

He abandoned his reverie and continued down the stairs of the Questura, eager for the coffee that would help him through the rest of the afternoon. As he approached the front door, the officer at the switchboard tapped on the window of his tiny cubicle and waved Brunetti towards him. When Brunetti was inside, the guard said into the telephone receiver, 'I think you should talk to the Commissario, Dottoressa. He's in charge.' He passed him the phone.

'Brunetti.'

'You're a commissario?'

'Yes.'

'This is Dottoressa Fabbiani. I'm the chief librarian at the Biblioteca Merula. We've had a theft. A number of them, I think.' Her voice was unsteady, the voice he had heard from victims of muggings or assault.

‘From the collection?’ Brunetti asked. He knew the library, had used it once or twice as a student but had not given it a thought for decades.

‘Yes.’

‘What’s been taken?’ he asked, preparing in his mind the other questions that would have to follow her answer.

‘We don’t know the full extent yet. So far, all I’m sure of is that pages have been cut from some volumes.’ He heard her deep intake of breath.

‘How many?’ Brunetti asked, pulling a pad and pencil towards him.

‘I don’t know. I just discovered it.’ Her voice tightened as she spoke.

He heard a man’s voice from her end of the phone. She must have turned away to answer him, for her voice grew indistinct for a moment. Then, silence from her end of the line.

He thought of the procedures he had gone through at the libraries in the city whenever he consulted a book and asked, ‘You have records of the people who use the books, don’t you?’

Was she surprised that a policeman should ask such a question? That he knew about libraries? It certainly took her some time to answer. ‘Of course.’ Well, that put him in his place, didn’t it? ‘We’re checking on that.’

‘Have you found who did it?’ Brunetti asked.

There followed an even longer pause. ‘A researcher, we think,’ she said, then added, as if Brunetti had accused her of negligence, ‘He had the proper identification.’ He heard the response of any bureaucrat beginning to formulate a defence at the first whisper of an accusation of negligence.

‘Dottoressa,’ Brunetti began, using what he hoped was his most persuasive and professional voice, ‘we’ll need your help in identifying him. The sooner we find him,

the less time he'll have to sell what he's taken.' He saw no reason to spare her this reality.

'But the books are destroyed,' she said, sounding anguished, as at the death of a loved person.

To a librarian, damage was as bad as theft, he imagined. Changing his voice to that of Authority, he said, 'I'll be there as soon as I can, Dottoressa. Please do not touch anything.' Before she could protest, he added, 'And I'd like to see the identification he gave you.' When there was no response, he replaced the phone.

Brunetti remembered that the library was on the Zattere, but the exact location eluded him now. He returned his attention to the guard and told him, 'If anyone wants me, I've gone to the Biblioteca Merula. Call Vianello and tell him to go over with two men to take fingerprints.'

Outside, he found Foa, arms folded, legs crossed at the ankles, leaning against the railing that ran along the canal. His head was tilted back, and his eyes were closed against the early spring sun, but when Brunetti approached, the pilot asked, 'Where can I take you, Commissario?' before opening his eyes.

'The Biblioteca Merula,' he said.

As if finishing Brunetti's sentence, Foa continued, 'Dorsoduro 3429.'

'How'd you know that?'

'My brother-in-law and his family live in the next building, so that has to be the address,' the pilot answered.

'I feared for a moment that the Lieutenant had made some new rule that obliged you to learn all the addresses in the city by heart.'

'Anyone who's grown up on boats knows where everything in the city is, sir. Better than a GPS,' Foa said, tapping his forehead with his finger. He pushed himself away from the railing and made towards the boat but stopped

mid-stride and turned to Brunetti. 'You ever hear what became of them, sir?'

'Of what?' a confused Brunetti asked.

'The GPS's.'

'Which GPS's?'

'The ones that were ordered for the boats,' Foa answered. Brunetti stood still, waiting for the explanation.

'I was talking to Martini a few days ago,' Foa continued, naming the officer in charge of procurement, the man to consult to have a radio fixed or get a new flashlight. 'He showed me the invoice and asked me if I knew whether they were any good or not. The model that had been ordered.'

'And did you?' Brunetti asked, wondering where this conversation had come from.

'Oh, we all know about them, sir. They're crap. None of the taxi drivers wants them, and the only person I know who ever bought one for himself got so mad at it one day that he pulled it off the windscreen of his boat and tossed it over the side.' Foa walked towards the boat, then stopped again and said, 'That's what I told Martini.'

'What did he do?'

'What can he do? They're ordered by some central office in Rome, and someone there gets something for having ordered them, and someone else gets something for letting the order go through.' He shrugged and stepped on to the boat.

Brunetti followed him, puzzled that Foa had chosen to tell him this, for he must have known that there was nothing Brunetti could do, either. That was how things worked.

Foa switched on the motor and said, 'Martini told me the invoice was for a dozen of them.' He stressed the amount.

'There are only six boats, aren't there?' Brunetti asked, a question Foa didn't bother to answer.

'How long ago was this, Foa?'

'Couple of months. Some time in the winter, I'd say.'

'You know if they ever got here?' Brunetti asked.

Foa tilted up his chin and made a clicking sound with his tongue: he could have been a street Arab, so much did his gesture remind Brunetti of the way they dismissed the ridiculous.

Brunetti found himself at a familiar crossroads, where he could go forward only to move backward, move sideways to move forward, or just close his eyes and take a comfortable seat and not move at all. If he spoke to Martini and learned that the GPS systems had been ordered and paid for but were nowhere in evidence, he would create trouble for himself. He could begin to look around privately and perhaps prevent further looting of the public purse. Or he could simply ignore it and get on with more important things or with things that might be remedied.

'You think this is the beginning of spring?' he asked the pilot.

Foa glanced aside and smiled: their agreement could not have been more congenial. 'I think it might be, sir. I hope so. I'm sick to death of the cold and fog.'

As they completed their turn into the *bacino* and looked forward again, they both gasped. There was nothing theatrical about it, no attempt to make a scene or a statement. They did no more than express their human response to the otherworldly and impossible. Ahead of them was the stern of one of the newest, largest cruise ships. Its enormous rear end stared bluntly back at them, as if daring them to comment.

Seven, eight, nine, ten storeys. Was this possible? From their perspective, it blocked out the city, blocked out the light, blocked out all thought of sense or reason or the appropriateness of things. They trailed along behind it, watching the wake it created avalanche slowly towards

the *rivas* on both sides, tiny wave after tiny wave after tiny wave, and what in God's name was the thrust of that vast expanse of displaced water doing to those stones and to the centuries-old binding that kept them in place? Suddenly the air was unbreathable as a capricious gust blew the ship's exhaust down on them for a few seconds. And then the air was just as suddenly filled with the sweetness of springtime and buds and new leaves, fresh grass and nature's giggly joy at coming back for another show.

They could see, scores of metres above them, people lining the deck, turned like sunflowers to the beauty of the Piazza and the domes and the bell tower. A vaporetto appeared on the other side, coming towards them, and the people on the deck, no doubt Venetians, raised their fists and shook them at the passengers, but the tourists were looking the other way and failed to see the friendly natives. Brunetti thought of Captain Cook, dragged from the surf, killed, cooked, eaten by other friendly natives. 'Good,' he said under his breath.

Not far along the *riva* of the Zattere, Foa pulled the boat to the right, flipped it into reverse and then neutral to let it glide to a stop. He grabbed a mooring rope and jumped up on to the pavement, bent and tied a quick knot. He reached down and grabbed Brunetti's hand to steady him as he made the jump to the pavement.

'This is probably going to take some time,' Brunetti told the pilot. 'You might as well go back.'

But Foa wasn't paying attention: his eyes were on the stern of the ship as it made its slow progress towards the dock at San Basilio. 'I've read,' Brunetti began, speaking Veneziano, 'that no decision can be made about them until all the agencies agree.'

'I know,' Foa answered, his eyes still on the boat. 'Magistrato alle Acque, Regione, junta of the city, Port

Authority, some ministry in Rome ...' He paused, still transfixed as the boat moved farther away, hardly diminishing in size. Then Foa's voice returned, and he named some of the men on these panels.

Brunetti knew many, though not all, of them. When Foa reached the names of three former city officials of the highest rank, he pounded on the pronunciation of each surname like a carpenter hammering the final nails into the lid of a coffin.

'I've never understood why they divided things up like that,' Brunetti said. Foa, after all, came from a family that had lived on and from the *laguna*: fishermen, fishmongers, sailors, pilots and mechanics for ACTV. They had everything except gills, the Foas did. If anyone were to understand the bureaucracy of the waters in and off which the city lived, it would be people like them.

Foa gave him the smile a teacher gives his dullest pupil: affectionate, poignant, superior. 'Do you think eight separate committees are ever going to reach a decision?'

Brunetti looked at the pilot as illumination came. 'And only a joint decision will stop the ships,' he said, a conclusion which caused Foa's smile to broaden.

'So they can consider and reconsider for ever,' the pilot said, in open admiration of the ingenuity of having divided the decision among so many separate governmental organizations. 'Getting their salaries, making inspection tours to other countries to see how things are done there, holding meetings to discuss projects and plans.' Then, mindful of a recent article in *Il Gazzettino*, 'Or hiring their wives and children as consultants.'

'And picking up small gifts that might fall from the table of the companies that own the ships?' Brunetti offered, though he knew as he spoke that this was not the sort of example he was meant to give to the uniformed branch.



Foa's smile warmed, but he said only, pointing along the narrow canal, 'Down there, just before the bridge. It's the green door.'

Brunetti waved his thanks for the ride and for the directions. A moment later he heard the motor spring to life, and when he turned he saw the police boat swinging out into the canal in a wide arc that would take it in the direction from which they had come.

Brunetti noticed that the pavement was wet, with large puddles against the walls of the buildings he passed. Curious, he walked back to the edge of the *riva* and looked down at the water, but it was more than half a metre below him. It was low tide, there was no *acqua alta*, and no rain had fallen for days, so the only way the water could have got there was by being washed up by a passing ship. And they were meant to believe, he and the other citizens the administration considered to be imbeciles, that these boats did no damage to the fabric of the city.

Weren't most of the men making these decisions Venetians? Hadn't they been born in the city? Weren't their children in the schools and university? They probably spoke Veneziano during their meetings.

He thought memory would return as he walked towards the library, but it all failed to become familiar to him. Nor could he recall whether the *palazzo* had been Merula's home when he lived in Venice: that was a job for the Archivio Storico, not the police, whose records did not go back a thousand years.

When Brunetti passed through the open green door, he told himself it looked familiar, though what it really looked like was any of the Renaissance courtyards in the city, complete with outside steps leading to the first floor and a metal-capped well. He was drawn to it by the beautifully preserved carving, still safe inside these walls. Fat pairs of

angels supported a family crest he did not recognize. The wings of some of the angels were in need of attention, but the rest of the carving was intact. Fourteenth century, he'd guess, with a garland of carved flowers encircling the well just under the metal lid: he surprised himself by having a strong memory of that, if of little else he saw there.

He started towards the remembered staircase, its broad marble handrail interspersed with the carved heads of lions, each the size of a pineapple. He climbed the stairs, patting the heads of two of the lions. At the top of the first flight, he saw a door and beside it a new brass plaque: 'Biblioteca Merula'.

He stepped inside, into coolness. By this time in the afternoon, the day had grown clement and he had begun to regret wearing his woollen jacket, but now he felt the sweat drying across his back.

In the small reception area, a young man with a fashionable two-day beard sat behind a desk, a book open in front of him. He looked at Brunetti and smiled and, when he approached the desk, asked, 'May I help you?'

Brunetti took his warrant card from his wallet and showed it. 'Ah, of course,' the young man said. 'You want Dottorressa Fabbiani, Signore. She's upstairs.'

'Isn't this the library?' Brunetti asked, pointing to the door behind the young man.

'This is the modern collection. The rare books are upstairs. You have to go up another flight.' Seeing Brunetti's confusion, he said, 'Everything was changed around about ten years ago.' Then, with a smile, 'Long before my time.'

'And long after mine,' Brunetti said and returned to the staircase.

In the absence of lions, Brunetti ran his hand along the bevelled marble railing smoothed by centuries of use. At the top, he found a door with a bell to the right. He rang

it and, after some time, the door was opened by a man a few years younger than he, wearing a dark blue jacket with copper buttons and a military cut. He was of medium height, thickset, with clear blue eyes and a thin nose that angled minimally to one side. 'Are you the Commissario?' he asked.

'Yes,' Brunetti answered and extended his hand. 'Guido Brunetti.'

The man took it and gave it a quick shake. 'Piero Sartor,' he said. He stepped back to allow Brunetti into what looked like the ticket office of a small, provincial train station. A waist-high wooden counter stood to the left, on it a computer and two wooden trays for papers. A wheeled rack with what seemed to be very old books piled on it was parked against the wall behind the counter.

There might be a computer, which there had not been in the libraries he had used as a student, but the smell was the same. Old books had always filled Brunetti with nostalgia for centuries in which he had not lived. They were printed on paper made from old cloth, shredded, pounded, watered down and pounded again and hand-made into large sheets to be printed, then folded and folded again, and bound and stitched by hand: all that effort to record and remember who we are and what we thought, Brunetti mused. He remembered loving the feel and heft of them, but chiefly he remembered that dry, soft scent, the past's attempt to make itself real to him.

The man closed the door, pulling Brunetti from his reverie, and turned to him. 'I'm the guard. I found the book.' He tried, but failed, to keep the pride out of his voice.

'The damaged one?' Brunetti asked.

'Yes, sir. That is, I brought the book down from the reading room, and when Dottoressa Fabbiani opened it, she saw that pages had been cut out.' His pride was replaced by indignation and something close to anger.

‘I see,’ Brunetti said. ‘Is that what you do, bring books down to the desk?’ he asked, curious about what the duties of a guard might entail in this institution. He assumed it was his position as guard that made Sartor so unusually forthcoming in speaking to the police.

The look the man gave him was sudden and sharp and might as easily have been alarm as confusion. ‘No, sir, but it was a book I’d read – well, parts of it – so I recognized it right away, and I didn’t think it should be left on the table,’ he blurted out. ‘Cortés. That Spanish guy who went to South America.’

Sartor seemed uncertain how to explain this and went on more slowly. ‘He was so enthusiastic about the books he was reading that he made me interested in them, and I thought I’d take a look.’ Brunetti’s curiosity must have been visible, for he continued, ‘He’s American, but he speaks Italian very well – you’d never know – and we got into the habit of chatting if I was on the desk while he was waiting for the books to come down.’ He paused, and when he saw Brunetti’s expression, went on. ‘We have a break in the afternoon, but I don’t smoke and I can’t drink coffee,’ he said, then added, ‘Stomach. Can’t handle it any more. I drink green tea, but none of the bars around here has it, well, not a kind that I’d drink.’ Before Brunetti could ask why he was being told all of this, Sartor said, ‘So I have a half-hour and don’t much want to go out, so I started to read. Some of the people who come to do research mention books, and sometimes I try to read them.’ He smiled nervously, as if conscious of having overstepped some sort of class barrier. ‘That way I have something interesting to tell my wife when I get home.’

Brunetti had always taken a special delight in the surprising things he learned from people: they did and said the most unexpected things, both good and bad. A

colleague had once told him how, when his wife was in the seventeenth hour of labour with their first child, he had grown tired of listening to her complain, and Brunetti had fought down the impulse to slap him. He thought of his neighbour's wife, whose cat was set free from the kitchen window every night to roam the rooftops of the neighbourhood, and who came home every morning with a clothes peg, not a mouse, in his mouth, a gift not unlike the interesting story Sartor took home to his wife.

Brunetti, interested in what he had to say, asked, 'Hernán Cortés?'

'Yes,' Sartor answered. 'He conquered that city in Mexico they called the Venice of the West.' He stopped and added, afraid perhaps that Brunetti might think him a fool, 'That's what the Europeans called it, not the Mexicans.'

Brunetti nodded to show he understood.

'It was interesting, although he was always thanking God when he killed a lot of people: I didn't like that very much but he was writing to the King, so maybe he had to say things like that. But what he said about the country and the people was fascinating. My wife liked it, too.'

He looked at Brunetti, whose approving smile to a fellow reader was enough to encourage him to continue. 'I liked how things were so different from how they are now. I read some of it, and I wanted to finish it. Anyway, I recognized the title – *Relación* – when I saw it in front of the place where he usually sits and brought it downstairs because I thought a book like that shouldn't be lying around up there.'

Brunetti assumed this unnamed 'he' was the man believed to have cut the pages from the book, so he asked, 'Why did you bring it down if he was working with it?'

'Riccardo, from the first floor, told me he'd seen him going down the stairs when I was at lunch. He never did that before. He always comes in soon after we open and stays

until the afternoon.' He considered that for a moment and then added, sounding genuinely concerned, 'I don't know what he does about lunch: I hope he hasn't been eating in there.' Then, as if embarrassed to have confessed such a thing, he added, 'So I went up to see if he was coming back.'

'How would you know that?' Brunetti asked with genuine curiosity.

Sartor gave a small smile. 'If you work here for a long time, Signore, you learn the signs. No pencils, no markers, no notebook. It's hard to explain, but I just know if they're finished for the day. Or not.'

'And he was?'

The guard nodded emphatically. 'The books were stacked in front of where he had been sitting. His desk light was turned off. So I knew he wouldn't come back. That's why I took the book back down to the main desk.'

'Was this unusual?'

'For him it was. He always packed up everything and took the books back himself.'

'What time did he leave?'

'I don't know the exact time, sir. Before I came back at two-thirty.'

'And then?'

'As I said, when Riccardo told me he'd left, I went up to make sure and see about the books.'

'Is that something you'd normally do?' Brunetti asked, curiously. The guard had seemed alarmed the first time he asked this.

This time he answered easily. 'Not really, sir. But I used to be a runner – a person who brings books to the readers and puts them back on the shelves – so I sort of did it automatically.' He smiled a very natural smile and said, 'I can't stand to see the books lying around on the tables if no one is there, using them.'

'I see,' Brunetti said. 'Go on, please.'

'I brought the books down to the circulation desk. Dottoressa Fabbiani was just coming in from a meeting, and when she saw the Cortés she asked to look at it, and when she opened it, she saw what had happened.' Then, speaking more slowly, almost as if having a conversation with himself, he said, 'I don't understand how he could have done it. There's usually more than one person in the room.'

Brunetti ignored that and asked, 'Why did she open that particular book?'

'She said it was a book she'd read when she was at university, and she loved the drawing it had of that city. So she picked it up and opened it.' He thought a moment and then added, 'She was so pleased to see it, she said, after all these years.' Noticing Brunetti's expression, he said, 'People who work here feel that way about books, you know.'

'You said there were usually more people in the room?' Brunetti inquired mildly. Sartor nodded. 'There's usually a researcher or two, and there's a man who's been reading the Fathers of the Church for the last three years, sir. We call him Tertullian: that's the first book he asked for, and the name stuck. He's here every day, so I guess we've sort of begun to depend on him as a kind of guard.'

Brunetti forbore to ask about Tertullian's choice of reading matter. Instead, he smiled and said, 'I can understand.'

'What, sir?'

'That you'd trust someone who spent years reading the Fathers of the Church.'

The man smiled nervously, responding to Brunetti's tone. 'Perhaps we've been negligent,' he said. When Brunetti did not respond, he added, 'About security, that is. Few people come to the library, and after a while, I

suppose we begin to feel as though we know them. So we stop being suspicious.'

'Dangerous,' Brunetti permitted himself to say.

'To say the very least,' a woman's voice said behind him, and he turned to meet Dottoressa Fabbiani.