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Alibi

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Extract

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SPHERE

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CHAPTER ONE

AFTER THE WAR, my mother took a house in Venice. She'd gone first to Paris, hoping to pick up the threads of her old life, but Paris had become grim, grumbling about shortages, even her friends worn and evasive. The city was still at war, this time with itself, and everything she'd come back for – the big flat on the Rue du Bac, the cafés, the market on the Raspail, memories all burnished after five years to a rich glow – now seemed pinched and sour, dingy under a permanent cover of grey cloud.

After two weeks she fled south. Venice at least would look the same, and it reminded her of my father, the early years when they idled away afternoons on the Lido and danced at night. In the photographs they were always tanned, sitting on beach chairs in front of striped changing huts, clowning with friends, everyone in kaftans or bulky one-piece woollen bathing suits. Cole Porter had been there, writing patter songs, and since my mother knew Linda, there were a lot of evenings drinking around the piano, that summer when they'd just married. When her train from Paris finally crossed over the lagoon, the sun was so bright on the water that for a few dazzling minutes it actually seemed to be that first summer. Bertie, another figure in the Lido pictures, met her

at the station in a motorboat, and as they swung down the Grand Canal, the sun so bright, the palazzos as glorious as ever, the whole improbable city just the same after all these years, she thought she might be happy again.

A week later, with Bertie negotiating in Italian, she leased three floors of a house on the far side of Dorsoduro that once belonged to the Ventimiglia family and was still called Ca' Venti. The current owner, whom she would later refer to, with no evidence, as the marchesa, took clothes, some silver-framed family photographs, and my mother's cheque and moved to the former servants' quarters on the top floor. The rest of the house was sparsely furnished, as if the marchesa had been selling it off piece by piece, but the piano nobile, all damask and chandeliers, had survived intact, and Bertie made a loan of some modern furniture from his palazzo on the Grand Canal to fill a sitting room at the back. The great feature was the light, pouring in from windows that looked out past the Zattere to the Giudecca. There were maids, who came with the house without seeming to live there, a boat moored on the canal, and a dining room with a painted ceiling that Bertie said was scuola di Tiepolo but not Tiepolo himself. The expatriate community had begun to come back, opening shuttered houses and planning parties. Coffee and sugar were hard to get, but wine was cheap and the daily catch still glistened and flopped on the market tables of the pescaria. La Fenice was open. Mimi Mortimer had arrived from New York and was promising to give a ball. Above all, the city was still beautiful, every turn of a corner a painting, the water a soft pastel in the early evening, before the lamps came on. Then the music started at Florian's and the boats rocked gently at the edge of the piazzetta, and it all seemed timeless, lovely, as if the war had never happened.

I learned all this many weeks later in a telephone call she had somehow managed to put through by 'going to the top'. At this time the trunk lines into Germany were reserved to the military, so I imagined that a general, some friend of a friend, had been charmed or browbeaten into lifting a few restrictions. The call, in any case, caused a lot of raised eyebrows in the old I. G. Farben Building outside Frankfurt where I pushed files into one tray or another for USFET while I waited for my separation papers. I had been in Germany since the beginning of the year, first with G-2, then attached to one of the de-Nazification teams separating the wicked from the merely acquiescent. Frankfurt was still a mess, the streets barely passable, filled with DPs and hollow-eyed children with edema bruises. The phone call, with its scratches and delays, seemed to come from another world, so far from the rubble and desperation just outside my window that its news seemed irrelevant. The marchesa was quiet; you hardly knew she was there ('darling, not even a *flush*'). My room had a wonderful view. Her pictures hadn't arrived from New York yet, but Bertie, a treasure and fluent, was looking into it. It was a call that began in what my father used to call her medias res – a plunge into the middle of whatever she was thinking, followed by exasperation when you didn't know what she was talking about. Finally I understood that she had moved to Venice intending to stay, which meant that my home would be there too. The point of the call, in fact, was to say she was expecting me for Christmas.

'I'm still in the army.'

'Well, they give passes, don't they? I mean, it's not as if the war's still on. And I'm sure you could use the break. I've seen the newsreels – it looks just awful there.'

'Yes.' Camps full of corpses, wheeled out in farm carts to mass graves. Feral kids eating out of PX rubbish bins. Women passing bricks hand over hand, digging out. Not what anyone had expected, pushing over the Rhine. GIs rich with a pack of Luckies. What happens after.

'Well, then,' she said. 'Won't it be wonderful? To have Christmas together? It's been years.'

'In a Fascist country,' I said, half teasing.

'It's not the same thing at all. They weren't *Nazis*. Anyway, all that's over. It's lovely here, just like before. I can't wait for you to see the house. Maybe it'll snow. They say it's enchanting in the snow.'

Characteristically, she hung up without giving me her address, so it was to Bertie that I later wrote to say that I'd be spending Christmas in the hospital. After surviving actual combat and the tough early days of the occupation, what got me, embarrassingly, was a rusty nail, a careless step in the debris of a Frankfurt street that caused a puncture wound and required tetanus treatment and a holiday spent with amputees and boys with nervous tics. By the time I finally got to Venice it was February, I was out of the army and the city was huddled against a damp, misty cold.

The piano nobile, as grand and formal as described, was freezing, kept dark but not draftless by long, heavy drapes. The sitting room, warmed by space heaters from Bertie, was comfortable, but the high-ceilinged Tiepolo dining room made meals so chilly and unpleasant that my mother had taken to eating in the kitchen or off a tray, sitting next to the bars of her electric fire. Above us, the marchesa had become so silent that a maid was sent up to check, as if she might be one of those birds that grow still on a winter branch, then suddenly fall over.

What would have changed everything was sun, cutting across the Adriatic to seep into all the tile roofs and parquet floors as it often did even in February, but the sky that winter was German: cloudy and grey. In the evenings, near our house, there was no light at all. A fog would come in from the sea, filling the Giudecca channel. Streetlights were spaced far apart to save power, and the calles became dark medieval paths again, designed for people with torches.

I noticed none of this – or rather, it was all so like the grey I was used to that I accepted it as natural, the way things were. The gloomy afternoons were no different from the weather in my head, full of listless shadows, an urge to draw in. Does anyone really come back from the war? The lucky ones just keep going, on to the next fight, unaware that they're breathing different air. The rest of us have to be brought up in stages, like deep-sea divers, to prevent the bends. The boys in the hospital had come back too fast – their faces twitched, their eyes darted at every sound, prey. I slept. The fog that came in at night from the lagoon would fill my head too, a lulling numbness, asking to be wrapped in blankets, left alone. Sometimes there were dreams – really ways of going back, reminders of the nightmare time that was supposed to be over – but mostly the sleep was just fog, opaque and shapeless.

'Just like Swann, *couché de bonne heure*,' my mother would say, but idly, not really worried, for by this time Dr Maglione had come back into her life, so she was spending evenings out, unaware that when she left me with a book I was already halfway up the stairs in my mind, curling up with the fog.

The result was that I was waking early, before first light. It

wasn't insomnia – I slept deeply, snug under a warm duvet – but some automatic awareness that the light was about to change, the way plants are said to lift their heads towards the dawn. My bedroom window faced across the channel to the Redentore and I would look out into the darkness, waiting for its lines to start forming, as if Palladio himself were sketching them in again, until finally everything had definition, still murky but real. Then I would put on my heavy wool army coat and leave the house without making a sound, quieter even than the shy marchesa, and begin my walk.

Venice is often said to be a dream, but at that hour, when there is no one out, no sounds but your own steps, it is really so, no longer metaphor – whatever separates the actual paving stones from the alleys in your mind dissolves. The morning mist and the gothic shapes from childhood stories have something to do with this, the rocking slap of boats on the water, tugging at their mooring poles, but mostly it's the emptiness. The campos and largos are deserted, the buoy marker lights in the lagoon undisturbed by wakes, the noisy day, when the visitors fan out into the calles from the Piazzale Roma, still just a single echo. Things appear at that hour the way they do in sleep, gliding unconnected from one to the next, bolted garden door to shadowy church steps to shuttered shop window, no more substantial than fragments of mist.

The walk was always the same. First down along the Zattere, past the lonely vaporetto stations. Just before the Stazione Marittima I would turn into the calle leading to San Sebastiano, Veronese's church, and a bar for stazione workers that was always open by the time I got there, the windows already moist with steam hissing from the coffee machines.

The other customers, in blue workers' overalls bulked with sweaters underneath, would nod from their spots at the bar, taking in the army coat, then ignore me, turning back to their coffee and cigarettes, voices kept low, as if someone were still sleeping upstairs. Even at that hour a few were tossing back brandies. The coffee had been cut with something – chicory? acorns? – but was still strong enough to jolt me awake, and standing there with a first cigarette, suddenly alert to everything – the steamed windows, the whiff of scalded milk, isolated words of dialect – it seemed to me that I'd never been asleep at all.

Outside there were a few more people – a boy in a waiter's uniform heading towards one of the hotels, an old woman in a fur coat coaxing a dog to pee, a priest with his hands in his sleeves, staying warm, all the insomniacs and early risers I'd never seen before I became one of them. I supposed that if I headed over to the Rialto I could see the fish stalls being set up and the boats unloading, the early-morning working world, but I preferred the empty dream city. From San Sebastiano it was a straight path, only slightly angled by bridges, to Campo San Barnaba. No produce market yet, just a man hurrying toward the traghetto station, perhaps still not home from the night before. Then right towards the Accademia, following the natural course of the streets the way water runs in canals, looping finally around the museum, then through the back alleys towards Salute, not a soul in sight again, past the great swirling church and out along the fondamenta to the tip. Here, huddled in my coat with my back against the old customs house, I sat for hours looking across the water to the postcard everyone knew – Ruskin's waves of marble, the gilt of San Marco catching the first morning sun, the columned landing stage filling with boat

traffic, all the beautiful buildings rising out of the water, out of consciousness, the city's last dream.

I thought at first that my mother would tire of it, the way she tired of everything finally, except the past, but Dr Maglione was an unexpected wrinkle, a piece of future. After my father died there had been a period of melodramatic grief, followed, I assumed, by a series of friendships. But these had happened, if they had happened, offstage. I was away at school, then in the army, then overseas, so what I knew came from letters, and these had been full of other things – volunteer work, openings, her three-week job (unpaid) at the Art of This Century gallery and the inevitable fight with Peggy Guggenheim that followed. Then she had come back to Europe, not really looking for anyone, and suddenly there he was. Not slick or too young or in any way unpleasant – not unlike my father, in fact, grey hair thinning at the temples, quiet, almost reticent. And yet amused by her, the way my father had been, both of them perhaps drawn to a quicksilver quality neither possessed himself. In any case, he was here, making her look brighter, in love with Venice, not even aware the rooms were cold. So I put off going back to New York, unsettled, not sure where any of us was heading.

'He's not a fortune hunter, you know,' Bertie said. 'Besides, if you're after money, why not young money? Much nicer. And you know I adore Grace, but she can be a handful. Anyway, he had doges in his family.'

'That doesn't mean anything.'

'It does if you have them. And he's a real doctor, you know, it's not an honorific. My doctor, in fact, and I'm still here.'

'I thought it was drink.'

He picked up his glass. 'Well, that too. The point is, he's not a gigolo.'

'So you introduced them.'

'No, no. They've known each other for years. Since the old days. When we were all – well, younger than we are now. The parties, my God. I suppose that's part of it. It reminds them. Anyway, you ought to be grateful. You don't want her sitting home alone, do you? Imagine what that would be like. It's the first thing that occurred to me. There she was, all excited on the phone and packing bags, and I thought, what on earth am I going to do with her? In the winter, no less. People think they're going to like it here in the winter – they come for Carnival and wouldn't this be nice? – but they never do. The third night at Harry's, you can see it on their faces. Bored stiff.'

'You're not.'

'It's my home. I know what to expect. The point is, Grace needed a friend and now she has one. She's happy and she's out of your hair. You've got your life to get on with – not to worry about her. What are you planning to do, by the way?'

'I'm not sure yet.'

'Oh, the young. All the time in the world.'

'Right now I'm enjoying Venice, that's all.'

'Are you? Grace says you sleep all day.'

'No, I walk all day. It's the only way to see the city. Then I get tired and sleep at night.'

'Mm, a sort of farmer's life. Up and down with the birds. Are you that bored?' he said, his voice still light, just a hint of concern underneath.

'Not really. I like it. It's like being on leave.'

'From what?'

I shrugged. 'The army. Everything. Just for a while.'

'Don't stay too long, then. You don't want to get addicted.'

I looked at him, caught by the word, as if he knew somehow about the mornings sitting against the Dogana, drifting, the beauty of the place a kind of opiate.

'No. But I want to make sure she's all right. Doges or no.'

'Adam, they have *dinner*. A drink. Chat. Nobody's posted the *banns*. You know what I think? I can say this because I've known you all your life. Before your life. I remember when Grace was pregnant with you.' He lifted his glass, pointing a finger. 'You've got a little too much time on your hands. You're making trouble where there's no trouble to be made – for yourself, really. My advice – I know, who ever listens? – is be happy for your mother and mind your own business. Of course, maybe that's it.'

'What's it?'

'Not enough business of your own.'

I glanced at his thin, almost elfin face, eyes bright and interested behind the half-moon glasses.

'I don't want to be introduced. To anybody. Fix up someone else.'

'I don't fix people up,' he said, almost sniffing at the phrase but enjoying himself. 'What's that, army slang?'

'Yes, you do. Those cozy lunch parties and you sitting there watching, like a turtle.'

'A turtle. Listen to him.' He reached to a box on the coffee table for a cigarette, thinking.

'I mean it, Bertie. I can make my own friends.'

'People never do, though, you know. Have you noticed?'

'You seem to do all right.'

He lit the cigarette, looking over the flame with an arched

eyebrow. 'Well, I hire them. Oh, don't be vulgar, I don't mean like that.'

But I grinned anyway, thinking of the long line of research assistants, young men known to be in the house but rarely seen, like upstairs maids.

'One would think you were still twelve years old. Ten.'

'Almost,' I said, still grinning. 'Anyway, too young for your black book.'

'Oh, there's bound to be someone. People have sisters, don't they?'

And cousins, as it happened. Or, rather, the cousin's friend, a connection so tenuous that by the time it had been explained we were already introduced.

'He always does that,' I said, as Bertie walked away to join another group. 'He says it gives people something to talk about. It's Claudia, yes?'

She nodded, watching Bertie. It was one of his afternoon drinks parties, too late for tea but early enough to catch the sunset on the Grand Canal outside. Bertie's palazzo was near the Mocenigo on the Sant Angelo side, just before the canal makes its last bend toward the Accademia bridge, and in winter the late-afternoon light on the water was muted, almost a pale pink. What sun was left seemed to have moved inside to the burning fireplaces, making small circles of heat on either side of the room. The crowd was Bertie's usual mix – pale-faced curators from the Accademia, where he was 'attached' without being officially on staff, a few attractive men whom I took to be former research assistants, over-dressed expatriates with drinks, and Venetians rich or idle enough not to be at work at five in the afternoon. I had seen her earlier, standing alone by the window, looking out of

place and stranded, like someone who'd been promised a drink and then been forgotten. She was fingering her collar button, an unconscious distress signal, then caught my eye and stopped, dropping her hand but not looking away. I started over to rescue her, but Bertie suddenly appeared, moving her back into the crowd, still awkward but at least talking to people. By the time he made his way to me, any shyness was gone, her stare frank and curious.

'What do you usually talk about?' she said, her voice almost flat, as if the effort of speaking English had lowered it, brought it down an octave.

'Anything. Where you learned English, for instance.'

'In London. Before the war. My father wanted me to know English. But of course it's difficult, these past few years. To speak it.'

'It's fine,' I said, looking at her more carefully now. She was the first person I'd met here who had referred to the war at all. She was thin, with dark curly hair and a long neck held erect, a dancer's posture. She had come in office clothes, a grey suit with padded shoulders over a white blouse. Given the cocktail dresses around the room, she should have receded, drab against all that plumage, but instead the suit, with its pointed lapels, gave her a kind of intensity. She held herself with an alert directness, full of purpose, so that everything about her, not just the suit, seemed sharply tailored.

'No, it gets rusty. Rusty, yes?' she said, waiting for me to nod. 'I need practice. That's why I asked to meet you.'

'Really? I thought Bertie—'

'Yes, I asked him. You're surprised?'

'Flattered. I guess. Why me? Practically everyone here speaks English.'

She smiled a little. 'Maybe now it's not so flattering.' She glanced towards the room. 'The others look—'

I turned to follow her glance – maids passing trays, everyone talking loudly through wisps of smoke, laughing as the light faded behind them through the window.

'Frivolous,' I said.

She looked surprised, then bit her lip, smiling. 'Yes, but I was going to say old. And you were standing by the fire.'

'So I got elected. What if I'm frivolous too?'

'Signor Howard said you were in the war. So it's different. You were in Germany? In the fighting?'

'At first. Then a kind of cop. Hunting Nazis, for war crimes.'

She stared now, taking this in, interested. 'Then you know. How it was. Not like them,' she said, waving her hand a little to take in the room.

'Maybe they're the lucky ones. Like Venice.'

'Like Venice?'

'You get off the train here, it's hard to believe anything ever happened.'

'Well, from Germany. But even here, you know, wartime – it's not so easy.'

'No, I'm sorry,' I said quickly, imagining the lines, the shortages. 'I just meant, no bombs. You were here?'

'Most of the time.'

'A true Venetian.'

'Not for Venice. My family was from Rome. It was my grandfather who came here.'

'Your grandfather? In America, that would make you a founding family.'

'Founding?'

'Old.'

'Ah. No, but in Rome we were an old family. Since the empire.'

'Which empire?'

She hesitated, not sure what I meant. 'Rome.'

'What, with chariots?'

She smiled. 'Yes.'

'Claudia. A Roman name,' I said, watching her sip from her glass, easier now, even the sharp lapels on the suit somehow softer. 'How do you know Bertie?'

'I don't. He invited everyone from the Accademia. I work there. His friend has a cousin who knew—'

'I heard. I couldn't keep it straight then either. I haven't been yet – the Accademia. Maybe you'll give me a tour. Now that we've broken the ice.'

'There, that's one,' she said quickly, ignoring my question. 'You can help me with that. What does it mean, break the ice? I know, to be friendly, but how does it mean that? Like breaking through ice on a lake? I don't understand it.'

'I never thought about it,' I said. 'I suppose just a general stiffness, when people don't know each other, breaking through that.'

'But not melting the ice – you know, the friendship making things warmer. It's breaking.' She looked down at her drink, genuinely puzzled.

'All right, melted then. But now that it's melted, would you show me around the Accademia?'

'You should have a guide for that. I'm not really an expert on the paintings.'

'I'm not interested in the paintings.'

'Oh,' she said, unexpectedly flustered. She looked away. 'Are you in Venice long?' A party question.

'My mother's living here – for now, anyway. She's one of the frivolous people over there.'

'I didn't mean—'

'No, she is frivolous. It's part of her charm. It's what everybody likes about her.'

'Including you?'

'Sure.'

'A son who loves his mother. Very Italian.'

'You see how respectable. So, how about it? Some lunch hour? I'll help you with your English.'

She looked directly at me. 'Why?'

I stood there for a second, not knowing how to answer. 'Why?' I said finally. 'I don't know. I'm in Venice. I should get to know some Venetians.'

'They're Venetian,' she said, moving her hand towards the others.

'None of them asked to meet me.'

She smiled. 'Don't make too much of that. It was for politeness. And now you want to go out with me?' she said, trying 'go out'. 'You don't know anything about me.'

'I know your people go way back. So that's all right. And you're the first person I've enjoyed talking to since I got here.'

'But it's you who are talking.'

I grinned. 'Okay. You talk.'

'No, I have to go.'

'And leave me with them?' We turned. 'Look, now it's priests.' Bertie was greeting a priest in a flowing scarlet cassock, who extended his hand in a royal gesture, barely moving his head, standing in front of some unseen throne. 'Who's that? Do you know?'

'No.'

'I thought everybody here knew everybody. He must be a monsignor or a cardinal. Something. I wish I knew the difference. You're from Rome – can you tell by the colours?'

'I don't know. I'm a Jew,' she said quietly.

'Oh,' I said, turning back to her.

'Is that a problem?'

'Why should it be a problem?'

'Jews are not so popular. Not in America either, I think.'

'So you don't know,' I said, ignoring it, 'if he's a monsignor.'

'No. Don't you? You're not a Christian?'

'I'm not anything. Not a Catholic, anyway.'

'But not a Jew either.'

'Part. My grandfather.'

'Miller?'

'Muller. Changed. My father was a *mischling*.'

'One grandfather.'

'It was enough in Germany.'

She looked at me, then held out her hand. 'Thank you for the English. I have to go. It's already dark. Do you see Signor Howard?' She glanced around the room.

'He's getting the Church a drink. Come on, no one will miss us.'

'You're leaving?'

'I'm taking you home.'

'No, it's far.'

'Nothing's far in Venice.'

She laughed. 'How well do you know it?'

My mother intercepted us at the door, glass in hand.

'Darling, you're not going. Gianni will be here any . . . He'll be sorry to miss you.'

'Not too much.'

'Of course he will. Don't be silly. The army certainly hasn't done very much for your manners.'

'You say hi for me,' I said, pecking her on the cheek. 'I have to run. This is Miss – I'm sorry, I don't know your last name.'

'Grassini. Claudia Grassini,' she said, nodding to my mother.

'How nice,' my mother said, shaking her hand. 'Finding someone *new* at one of Bertie's parties. You probably think we're the waxworks.'

'We have to run,' I said.

'Perhaps you'd like to join—' my mother started, looking carefully at Claudia, assessing.

'Another time,' Claudia said.

'Of course,' my mother said, a pas de deux. 'Did you say goodbye to Bertie?' she said to me.

'He's in confession.'

She giggled. 'Oh, Bertie and his priests. You have to admit, though, he's the best-dressed person in the room. How did they manage, do you think? During the war. I mean, did they have coupons?'

But by this time we were out the door, walking down the stairs to the hall.

'What was that all about?' I said to Claudia. 'That look between you?'

'She's a mother. She wants to see if I'm all right. You know, like in the market. You feel the fruit.'

I laughed. 'How did you come out?'

'She's not sure. She's a widow?'

'For years.'

'What did he do, your father?'

'Have fun, mostly. Then he got sick.'

'Fun?'

'It was a different world. People did that then – have fun.'

'These people,' she said, lifting her head towards the stairs, then turning to the maid who was holding her coat. 'You don't have to do this. It's a long way. I can meet you at the Accademia if you'd really like that.'

'No, I want to see where a real Venetian lives.'

'A poor one, you mean.'

'Are you?'

'Yes, of course. Who lives like this now?' she said, looking up the staircase to the piano nobile. 'Only foreigners.'

We were alone at the vaporetto station, huddling in the corner against the cold. The fog had come in, blocking out the opposite side of the canal, so dense you felt you could snatch it in handfuls.

'So what do you do here?' she said, hunching her shoulders, hands stuffed in her pockets.

'Walk. See the city. What does anyone do in Venice? Meet people.'

'At Signor Howard's?'

'You disapprove?'

'No, no. It's not for me—' She stopped, then turned away, stamping her feet for warmth. 'Signor Howard helped me, at the Accademia.'

'Bertie likes doing that. Helping people. But you still don't like his friends.'

She looked up at me with a half-smile. 'Do you?'

'Not any more. I'm not sure why. I mean, I've known some of them for years. It's just that everything seems different now.'