Chapter 1

Venice, Sestiere Di Dorsoduro

It was the middle of the afternoon, and the windows of the old palazzo were partially opened to the crisp spring air. The study, filled with books and artwork obsessively arranged and cataloged and situated, overlooked the narrow canal, and the light that the room received was reflected off the buildings opposite, their weathered colors throwing off pale hues of apricot and lilac, wan ocher and coral and vanilla.

The sounds of the canal rose up on the summer heat and drifted into the room as well, carrying the voices of tourists strolling on the small *fondamenta*, the slosh of a passing gondola, the voices of merchants unloading produce from a small barge, water lapping under the bridge just beyond the window, a woman's laughter.

"Just put them here," the German said to the dealer, spreading his arms out over the long refectory table at which he sat and that he used as a working desk. He had moved aside orderly piles of paperwork and books to provide a clean surface.

The dealer nodded deferentially and approached the table with an oversize leather portfolio. His name was Claude Corsier, and he was a private art dealer from Geneva. He specialized in the drawings of artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the secondary market. That is,

deceased artists. His unusual ceremonious manner was not a demonstration of particular respect for the German client. Corsier was known for his courtesy to everyone, billionaire, and housemaid alike. It was said that his manner was a reflection of his lifelong respect for the artwork in which he traded.

Corsier put his portfolio on a small, marble-topped side table a step or two from his client and opened it. He was a large man, with big hands that one normally associated with farm workers and laborers. But Corsier's hands were pale and soft, his nails manicured; they had never been darkened by the sun or stained by soil or lifted anything heavier than a folio reference book. His burly physique was genetic, not occupational. He had been bookish since childhood.

Each drawing was enclosed in its own acid-free paper folder to protect it. After opening the first folder, Corsier turned it around and placed it on the table before the German.

"First, the Italians you wanted to see. Giovanni Boldini. Becoming very difficult to find these days. Six images here, and a small, quick sketch of a hand on the back of the sheet. These are studies for portraits, it seems, but the finished work, if it was ever completed, has never been identified." Leaning over the refectory table, he gently pointed to an image with the barrel end of a marbled fountain pen. The pen was less intrusive than using one's finger. "The turned head is quite good here," he said.

The German, whose name was Wolfram Schrade, nodded, bending over the sketch to look at it closely. He picked up a horn-handled magnifying glass from the table and examined each image on the sheet of paper. There were six.

"These are very nice," Schrade said. His accent was heavy, but attractive, sophisticated.

"I like them," Corsier agreed modestly.

The German picked up the paper and looked at the drawing on the back. Corsier watched him as he turned and held it up to the diffused light from the windows. He was a handsome man, tall and lean, in his early fifties. His hair was thick and coarse, and Corsier had always marveled that it very nearly was the exact color of old vellum. His features were fine, a straight, narrow nose, a rather wide mouth with a full lower lip. The

irises of his eyes were odd, almost lacking in any pigmentation at all.

Without commenting further, Schrade closed the folder, set it aside, and looked at Corsier, who was already turning to get a second one.

"Ettore Tito," Corsier said, placing the next opened folder before his client. "Studies for *La Perla*, now in a private collection. Very fine nudes. . .. The treatment here"—again the fountain pen pointed out a delicate line—"is exquisite, the way he handled the shadow at this concavity on the shoulder."

Schrade closed the folder and set it aside with the other one.

"And this artist is most difficult to find. . .." Corsier was unfolding a third folder.

The presentation took up the better part of an hour, and by the time Corsier had shown his client nine works, the most he had ever shown him at one sitting, the light coming into the room from the canal had become richer with the lower angle of the sun. The circular *rulli piombati* panes in the Renaissance windows were now concentric smears of pastel.

The drawings were stacked at Schrade's left elbow, and Corsier stood in front of the refectory table and folded his soft hands, looking down at the seated client.

"I will have all of them," Schrade said.

Corsier made a slight "as you wish" gesture with his hands. He had sold this man a fortune over the past dozen years, and this lot alone was a small fortune in itself.

"A drink to celebrate?" the German asked.

Corsier tilted his head forward, a bow of assent. Schrade got up from behind his desk and stepped across the marble floor to a sixteenth-century cabinet of dark walnut and opened the doors to reveal bottles of liquor. Two bottles were already opened, and he poured Corsier a glass of Prosecco, the dealer's favored drink with which to close a sale, and a glass of Bordolino for himself.

"Please, sit for a while," he said, giving the aperitivo to Corsier and gesturing to a pair of heavy, X-frame wooden armchairs nearer the windows. When they were seated, the German raised his glass and said, "To resolution."

Corsier was already drinking the Prosecco when he realized the

toast didn't make any sense to him. He was still swallowing, relishing the movement of the drink on his palate, when Schrade continued.

"I assume you've observed your usual discretion about bringing these to me," he said.

"Of course."

"There is no record that you've come here?"

"None."

"You've always been reliable on that score," Schrade conceded.

"All of my clients require discretion." Corsier took another large drink of the Prosecco.

The next few minutes were spent in casual conversation about drawings. The German was a voracious collector, and Corsier knew that he had large personal collections in his homes in Paris and Berlin. More than likely the drawings Corsier had just sold him would go to one of these two locations, where his client had elaborate archival spaces for exhibiting his collections.

"As for the matter of payment," Schrade said offhandedly, "I'm sure you won't mind if I settle with you later."

Corsier's last sip of Prosecco stuck in his throat and refused to go down. He struggled with it as his thoughts suddenly swarmed, turning, tacking, veering first in one direction, then in another, as he tried to concentrate on the most important implications of what his client had just said.

First of all, this was now the second time. Wolfram Schrade already owed Corsier for a group of symbolists' drawings that Corsier had brought him four months before, perhaps the best group of symbolists that Corsier had ever had in his possession and which he had collected over a period of nearly a year, specifically with this client in mind. There had been an even dozen drawings of extraordinary quality. It had come to 1.3 million Deutsche marks. Corsier had taken them to the German's Berlin home. Where he had left them. With only a promise of payment.

That was not so extraordinary. It wasn't an entirely comfortable position to be in, but he had known his client for twelve years and had never had any trouble collecting. So he had taken a deep breath. . ..

Now this. Nine drawings by the increasingly popular nineteenth-

century Italian realists. Almost a million Deutsche marks. The German's assumption that Corsier would carry him yet again was appalling. Especially since in the corner behind the refectory table sat a computer. Its screen was dark, but a small lime green light burned on the keyboard, proving to Corsier that it still had a heartbeat. On more than a few occasions Schrade had turned around at his desk-in Paris or Berlin or here- and paid Corsier instantly from his accounts in Liechtenstein or Cyprus. So Corsier knew that it could be done. He was just an electrical spark away from two million Deutsche marks.

He managed to swallow the Prosecco.

The more serious implication of Schrade's remark, the one that had caused a sudden empty space in Corsier's chest, a huge cavity without tissue or feeling or breath, was the implication that these two reversals in their relationship-for, to a man of Corsier's sensibilities, they were irrefutably reversals-were premonitory.

Schrade knew!

Corsier looked at his client, whose neutral coloring was a perfect foil for the dusty colors that fell on him, the failing light passing through the concentric striations in the small panes of the windows. He heard a gondola, the thick chuck-chuck-chuck of the oar in the rowlock as the boat was propelled along the canal. He concentrated, desperate to absorb everything in these last moments. Was that a cat mewing? A barrel, or something like it, being rolled along the fondamenta? What could it be if not a barrel? A cart?

All of this aural sensitivity had gone through his brain in an instant, no longer than it had taken him to swallow the imperceptibly hesitant Prosecco. After all, Corsier was a professional. He had been an operator most of his adult life, and he had done nearly all of his work in the brutal, high-stakes world of wealthy men. He had survived, and he had been successful. Corsier had brass balls, as a matter of fact. Though, to be sure, he himself would never, ever, have expressed it in such crass language.

"Oh," he said, lowering his glass. "This is very awkward for me, I'm afraid." He knitted his brow and looked squarely at Schrade. "This seriously affects my liquidity. After accommodating your last request . . . well, this is most difficult."

"Difficult?" Schrade smiled ever so slightly. "Well, I certainly understand the awkwardness of a loss of . . . liquidity."

It was a pointed remark. Corsier knew that his client was never going to baldly state the real subject of this conversation. Corsier pursed his mouth thoughtfully as though he were trying to ferret out a mutually agreeable resolution. In fact, he was concentrating as he had never concentrated before in his life, bringing to bear his entire genetic code on one single thing: not bolting for the door.

He was stunned at how complete, how all consuming, was his fear.

How would it happen? A gunshot? Poison? Torture to make him tell everything, even things he could no longer remember himself, and then end it with simple asphyxiation? Why this charade first? This cruel pretense of civility? He couldn't imagine, but he struggled with the nausea and continued to play his own part flawlessly.

"This is really quite irregular. Very difficult for me."

"I'm sorry," Schrade said, which he clearly was not.

"How long do you think you will need to delay payment?"

"Payment? Oh, I plan to resolve this as quickly as possible."

The double meanings shimmered before Corsier's sightless eyes. Venice, he thought, what a monumental surprise to die in Venice. He would never have imagined it. Never.

As he rode in his host's private launch back down the Grand Canal on his way to Marco Polo Airport, Claude Corsier was numb with fear. He was also tremulous with hope. There was the launch driver and a companion. After they passed through the mouth of the Grand Canal and skirted San Giorgio Maggiore, more than ten kilometers remained across the lagoon to the airport. He looked at the two men in front of him. Was one of them the executioner? Surely not. They hardly paid him any attention.

My God, Corsier thought, if he ever got away from this situation, he would disappear so thoroughly that he would become as invisible as breath.

The wind picked up and the launch slapped the waves with a hard, rhythmic jolt, throwing a light spray from the hull. A short distance away he could see the public vaporettos filled with tourists headed to the same

destination. He fought to avoid hyperventilation. His thoughts swung wildly back and forth between black, oppressive fear and an almost giddy exhilaration.

Then he thought of the drawings. Holy Mary. The wretched German was going to get twenty-one of some of the finest drawings Corsier had ever possessed . . . for absolutely nothing.

Chapter 2

HOUSTON

The first time he saw her was through the clear, moonstone-colors of water. Suddenly she entered his peripheral vision, gliding past him in the opposite direction, her long legs close together and scissoring gently, trailing an unstrung necklace of tiny silver bubbles.

She wore a black, membrane-sheer suit, and her dark hair, pulled back from her face and held in place by a single band at the nape of her neck, spread out behind her like a billow of ink let loose in the water. Though she wore a small pair of swimming goggles that partially obscured her eyes, he could see from the shape of her face and mouth that she was Asian.

That morning she got out of the pool only a few minutes before he did. By the time he completed his last lap and pulled himself from the water, she was nearly finished drying off, bending to towel between her thighs, her wet hair pulled to one side and draped over her shoulder. Without acknowledging him, she turned and walked away beside the pool toward the women's dressing room, nonchalant, as though they had done this together for decades, leaving a code of damp footprints behind her.

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At seven o'clock in the morning the Olympic size lap pool at the River Oaks Swimming Club is deserted. The water is glass still. The fresh early light, entering obliquely through the upper windows, refracts off the arched angles of the lofty groined ceiling and plunges into the water, penetrating all the way to the pale floor of the pool. It is quiet.

Every day for nearly five years Harry Strand had come here to swim, well before even the earliest club member appeared at eight o'clock.

It was a routine he had interrupted only once, for a period of three weeks, when his wife died. That had been eleven months ago. Her death had shaken him more deeply than anything that had ever happened to him. She had come to him late and had left him too soon, a flash of clarity in a life tangled with obscurities. He was approaching fifty when she died, and she had been eleven years younger. Though they were not in their youth anymore, they had no reason to believe that time was short. Her sudden death had sent him reeling, wobbling to the far edges where he had teetered precariously, dangerously close to breaking down, before wobbling back toward a holding pattern, to the old, anxious tensions of former times.

For the three rare years of his marriage to Romy, he actually had felt as though he had accrued some real measure of an elusive emotional equanimity. She had redeemed him from a lifetime of dissembling and increasing self-dissatisfaction and had taught him to believe in hope, and in the simple reality of virtue. Then she was gone.

The morning swim was one of the things he did to keep his brain from flying apart. It was a place and a way to begin the day with a reliable rhythm, an affirmation of purpose on a small scale and of peace at the heart of the universe. The aquatic ritual had been Romy's idea, a regimen deliberately put into play to contravene nearly twenty years of obfuscation. She said, only half joking, that the daily immersion would cleanse him, a circadian baptism to remind him that his life had changed.

So, after the funeral, after the horrible, soul-consuming afterbirth of death had passed and he was left with the silence and the solitude, he had returned to the rhythms of the water and the light to try to steady himself all over again. Even in Romy's absence, he found himself turning to her for help, to her idea of a proper ceremony for rebirth and a new beginning.

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The woman in the black Lycra tank suit came to swim laps beside him in the long empty pool every day for twelve consecutive days. She swam exactly half an hour. Sometimes she was there when he arrived, though she seemed only to have preceded him by minutes and left while he

was still swimming. Sometimes she came after he was already well into his laps, and she was still there when he left. Either way, for nearly two weeks they shared the same water and the same silence and the same light.

During those days it had happened a few times, by sheer chance, that they would swim for a while in tandem, and as he turned his head to the side with every other stroke of his arm he would see her long, sleek body slipping through the water as smoothly as it had ever been done, perhaps as smoothly as it could be done. Her form was impeccable. Then, gradually, his longer strokes would separate them again, and he would see her only in passing.

The twelve days they swam together were odd in just about every respect. Inevitably during that time their eyes connected briefly, but neither of them ever acknowledged the other. They never spoke. Yet by the twelfth day Strand had grown comfortable with her company, something he would not have expected. If he had been told in advance that another person would begin swimming with him at the exact same hour, he would have resented the intrusion immensely. It would have ruined everything that he sought in that particular hour of the day.

As it turned out, that hadn't happened. Very quickly, by the fifth day, he had begun to accept that she was going to be there. She possessed a discernible serenity that easily counterbalanced what he would otherwise surely have considered a disruption. She blended remarkably well into the equation he sought in those sequestered mornings.

Then she stopped coming. That had been nearly two months ago, and he hadn't seen her since.

He had inquired about her. The swimming club was private and very discreet. The only thing he could learn about her was that her name had been listed as Mara Song, recently arrived in Houston from Rome. No address, of course, no telephone number was available to him. For an instant he thought about leaving a message for her at the club, in the event that she had begun swimming at another time of day, then immediately rejected that as being far too overt. In fact, he didn't know why he wanted to meet her at all. Just about everything argued against it. If he wanted companionship, if he wanted to begin seeing someone, it didn't have to happen like this. He knew a number of women who were respectfully

keeping their distance—some keeping less of a distance than others, to be sure—waiting for him to decide to resume his life.

He was also aware of the irony of what he wanted. He could easily have spoken to her a dozen times—literally—during the two weeks she joined him in the water, but he didn't. Now that he couldn't, he wanted to.

So, with some effort, he tried to put the prospect of meeting Mara Song out of his mind. It didn't really make any sense. But he never swam now without thinking of her, thinking that at any moment she might suddenly be there, slipping through the light-illumined water, a dizzy trail of bubbles shimmering behind her like a visible scent.