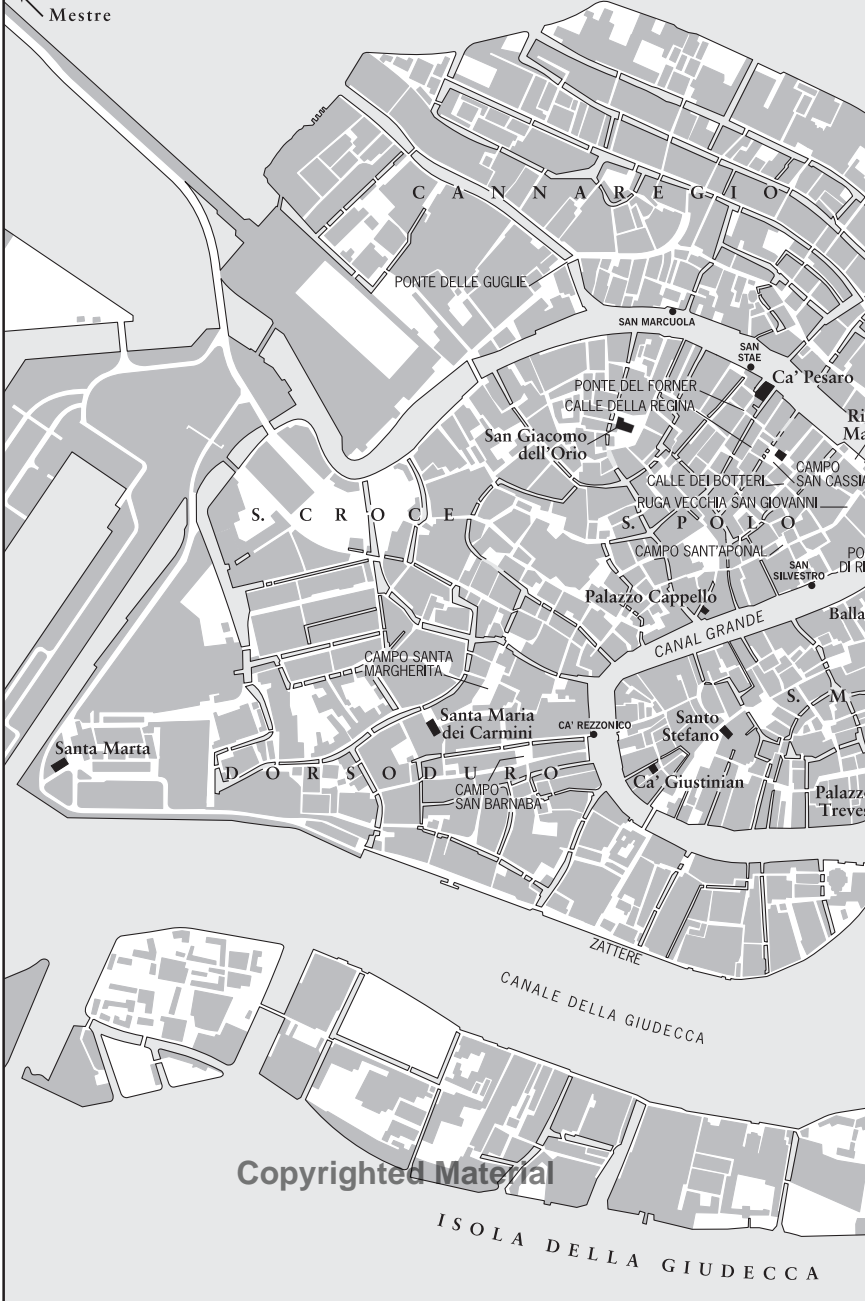


300 metres

Mestre



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ISOLA DELLA GIUDECCA



MURANO



Cimitero

ISOLA DI S. MICHELE

LAGUNA

Ospedale SS Giovanni e Paolo

CAMPO SS GIOVANNI E PAOLO

PONTE DEI GIOCATTOU

Fondaco

BARBARIA DELLE TOLE

San Francesco della Vigna

CAMPO SAN BARTOLOMEO

Questura

San Lorenzo

CALLE DEI FURLANI

A R S E N A L E

CAMPO DO POZZI

CAMPO DELLE GORNE
RIO DELLE GORNE

C A S T E L L O

San Pietro

Rosa Salva

PIAZZA SAN MARCO

SAN ZACCARIA

Basilica di San Marco

RIVA DEGLI SCHIAVONI

BACINO DI SAN MARCO

VIA GARIBALDI

ISOLA DI S. GIORGIO
MAGGIORE

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Lido

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The law condemns, but love will spare.

Handel, *Esther*, Act II, Scene 3

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1

Having left the apartment smack on time so as to arrive at the Questura on time for a meeting with his superior, Brunetti found himself seated towards the rear of a Number One vaporetto, glancing idly through a copy of that morning's *Gazzettino*. Subconsciously aware that they had just left la Salute, starting to cross to Vallarosso, he heard the boat's motor slip into reverse. A Venetian system of batlike echolocation told him they were still some distance from the left bank of the canal, so the sound of the boat reversing was out of place: perhaps the Captain was trying to avoid something in the water ahead of them.

Brunetti lowered the paper, looked up, and saw nothing. Or, more accurately, he saw no farther than a sober grey wall he recognized instantly as an approaching bank of fog. It was hard to believe his eyes, so clear had the sky been when he'd left his home twenty minutes before. While he had been reading about the latest failure of the MOSE

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floodgates to function – after more than thirty years of plans and speculation – someone appeared to have draped a thick grey cloth in front of the vaporetto.

It was November; fog was thus to be expected, and the temperature was no warmer than it had been for the past week. Brunetti turned and looked at the man sitting on his right, but saw that he was so rapt by whatever showed on the screen of his phone that he would not have noticed seraphs had they descended and flown in close formation on either side of the boat.

They slowed to a stop a few metres from the grey wall, and the motor slipped into neutral. From behind him, Brunetti heard a woman whisper, *'Oddio'*, her voice filled with mild surprise, not fear. Brunetti looked towards the *riva* on his left and could see the Hotel Europa and Palazzo Treves, but apparently Ca' Giustinian had been devoured by the same dense mist that stretched across the Canal Grande in front of them.

The man beside him finally looked up from his phone and stared straight ahead, then returned his attention to the small screen in his left hand. Brunetti folded his paper and turned to look behind them. Through the back door and windows, he saw boats coming in their direction, others moving away from them towards the Rialto Bridge. A Number Two pulled out from the Accademia stop, starting towards them, but then it slowed and appeared to stop.

He heard the klaxon before he saw the taxi swerve around the stationary Number Two and tear towards them. As it passed the larger boat, Brunetti saw that the pilot was talking to a blonde woman who stood behind him. Just as they passed Brunetti, her mouth opened in what might have been a gasp, or a scream, forcing the driver to turn

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and face forward. Expressionless, he swung the tiller, swerved around the front of Brunetti's vaporetto and plunged into the curtain of fog.

Brunetti pushed past his neighbour and out on to the deck, listening for a crash from in front of them, but all he heard was the disappearing noise of the taxi. Their own engine throbbed back into life and they began to edge forward. From where he stood, Brunetti could not see if the radar on the roof of the cabin was turning, but surely it had to be or they would not be venturing to move at all.

Then, as easily as if they were aboard a magic boat in a fantasy novel, they slipped through the grey curtain, and sunlight was restored to them. Inside the pilot's cabin, the sailor, completely relaxed, half leaned back against the window, and the Captain looked ahead, hands on the tiller. On the embankment, the *palazzi*, freed of their foggy wrappings, moved calmly to the left as the vaporetto approached the Vallaresso stop.

Behind him, the cabin door slid open and passengers slipped past him and bunched together in front of the railing. The boat docked, the sailor slid back the metal railing, people got off, people got on, the sailor slid the railing closed, and the boat departed. Brunetti looked back in the direction of the Accademia, but there was no sign of fog. Boats approached them and moved away: ahead lay the *bacino*; on the left, the Basilica, the Marciana, and the Palazzo stood quietly in their appointed places while the morning sun continued sweeping up last night's shadows.

Brunetti looked into the cabin, wondering if those inside had seen the same thing he had, but he had no memory of which of them had been aboard when he saw the fog. He would have had to ask them, but anticipation of their looks kept him from doing so.

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Brunetti touched the top of the railing, but it was dry, as was the deck. He was wearing a dark blue suit, and he felt the sun warm his right sleeve and shoulder. The sun glowed; the air was fresh and dry; the sky was cloudless.

He got off at San Zaccaria, forgetting his newspaper behind and, as he watched the boat pulling away, leaving behind any hope of verifying what he had seen. He walked slowly down the *riva*, grew tired of pondering the inexplicable, and instead concentrated his thoughts on what he would have to do when he got to the Questura.

The previous afternoon, Brunetti had received an email from his superior, Vice-Questore Giuseppe Patta, requesting that he come and have a word with him the following morning. No explanation had been given, which was normal; the language was polite, which was not.

Most of Vice-Questore Patta's behaviour was predictable for a man who had progressed through government bureaucracy. He seemed busier than he was; he never missed the opportunity to claim for himself any praise given to the organization for which he worked; he had a black belt in shifting blame or responsibility for failure to shoulders other than his own. What was not to be expected in someone who had, with such ease, shimmied up the pole of organizational success was the fact that he had, for decades, remained in the same place. Most men who attained his rank continued to rise, zigzagging from province to province, city to city, until perhaps a late-career promotion took them to Rome, where they tended to remain, like thick clots on the top of yogurt, cutting off light, air, and the possibility for growth from those below them.

Patta, like a Cambrian trilobite, had dug himself into place at the Venice Questura and had become a sort of

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living fossil. Beside him, petrified in the same layer of silt, was his assistant, Lieutenant Scarpa, another native of Palermo who had come to prefer these pastures new. Commissari came and went, three different Questori had been in charge during Patta's time in Venice; even the computers had been twice replaced. But Patta remained, a limpet attached to his rock, as the waters washed over him and away, leaving him intact and in place, his faithful Lieutenant at his side.

And yet, neither Patta nor Scarpa had ever demonstrated any enthusiasm for the city, nor any special fondness for it. If someone said that Venice was beautiful – perhaps even going so far as to say it was the most beautiful city on earth – Scarpa and Patta would exchange a glance that expressed, but did not state, disagreement. Yes, they both seemed to be thinking, but have you ever seen Palermo?

It was Patta's secretary, Signorina Elettra Zorzi, who greeted Brunetti as he came into the office from where she guarded that of the Vice-Questore. 'Ah, Commissario,' she said. 'The Vice-Questore called a few minutes ago and asked me to tell you he'd be here soon.'

Had Vlad the Impaler apologized for the dullness of the stakes, the message would have been no more astonishing. 'Is there something wrong with him?' Brunetti asked without thinking.

She tilted her head to one side to consider his question, began to smile and then stopped. 'He's been spending a lot of time on the phone with his wife lately,' she said and then added, 'Difficult to tell: he says very little in response to whatever it is she says to him.' She had somehow managed to place a type of listening device – Brunetti did not want to know more – in her superior's office, but he thought it best not to display any knowledge of this.

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'When he talks to Scarpa, they go over by the window.' Did that mean the device was on his desk or that Patta suspected something and saw to it that he and his assistant spoke in voices too low to be heard? Or did they just like the view?

'What?' Brunetti asked, eyebrows raised. Her blouse, he noticed, was the colour of beetroot and had white buttons down the front and on the cuffs. It fell with the liquid grace of silk.

She placed the outstretched fingers of one hand over those of the other and made a grille covering part of her desk. 'I've no idea what's troubling him.' Brunetti sensed that this was a question but did not understand how it could be: if anyone knew what Patta was up to, it was Signorina Elettra. She went on, eyes still on her hands. 'He isn't nervous when he talks to his wife. He listens but tells her to do whatever she thinks best.'

'And with Scarpa?'

'With him he does sound nervous.' She stopped, as though to reflect on this and then added, 'It could be that he doesn't like what Scarpa's saying. The Vice-Questore cuts him short. One time he even told him not to bother him with more questions,' she said, forgetting how unlikely it was that she would be able to hear any of this from her office.

'Trouble in paradise,' Brunetti said, straight-faced.

'So it would seem,' she agreed. Then she asked, 'Do you want to wait for him in his office, or should I call you when he comes in?'

'I'll go upstairs. Call me when he gets here.' Then, unable to resist a parting remark, he added, 'I wouldn't want the Vice-Questore to find me rifling through his drawers.'

'Neither would he,' said a deep voice from the doorway.

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‘Ah, Lieutenant,’ Brunetti said easily, directing a happy smile at the man lounging against the jamb of the door to the office. ‘Once again, we are two hearts that beat as one in our concern for the best interests of the Vice-Questore.’

‘Are you being ironic?’ Scarpa asked with a thin smile. ‘Or perhaps sarcastic, Commissario?’ The Lieutenant paused briefly and then added, by way of explanation, ‘Those of us who did not have the advantage of a university education sometimes have trouble telling the difference.’

Brunetti waited a moment to give the question the consideration it warranted, then answered, ‘In this case, I’d say it’s merely hyperbole, Lieutenant, where the obvious exaggeration is meant to render the entire statement false and unbelievable.’ When Scarpa did not respond, Brunetti added, ‘It’s a rhetorical device used to create humour.’ Scarpa said nothing, so Brunetti continued, smiling all the while, ‘In philosophy – one of those things we studied at university – it’s called the “Argumentum ad Absurdum”.’ Realizing he had gone quite far enough, Brunetti stopped himself from adding that it was a rhetorical device he found especially suitable to his conversations with the Vice-Questore.

‘And it’s meant to be funny?’ Scarpa finally asked.

‘Exactly, Lieutenant. Exactly. It is so clearly absurd to think that I would in any way abuse the Vice-Questore’s trust that the mere suggestion is enough to provoke laughter.’ Brunetti broadened his mouth as if his dentist had asked him to show his front teeth.

Scarpa propelled himself away from the door jamb with a quick shove of his left shoulder. One instant he’d been lounging casually; the next he was upright and much taller. The speed with which he uncoiled his easy, limp posturing reminded Brunetti of snakes he’d seen in television

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documentaries: leave them alone and they lie coiled, still as death; make a sound and they become a whiplash unbraiding in the sun, multiplying the range within which they can strike.

Smile intact, even broader than it had been, Brunetti turned to Signorina Elettra and said, 'I'll be in my office, if you'd be kind enough to call me when the Vice-Questore arrives.'

'Certainly, Signor Commissario,' Signorina Elettra agreed and turned to Scarpa to ask, 'What might I do for you, Lieutenant?'

Brunetti started towards the door. Scarpa did not move, still stood effectively blocking the exit. Time stopped. Signorina Elettra looked away.

Finally the Lieutenant stepped towards Signorina Elettra's desk, and Brunetti left the office.

2

On his desk, Brunetti found what he did not want to find, a file that had been accumulating pages ever since its first appearance in the Questura. He had last seen it, perhaps two months ago, when it had spent a week in his in-tray, resting there in the manner of the person a friend brings to dinner, who drinks too much, says nothing during the meal, and then refuses to leave, even after the other guests are long gone. Brunetti had not invited the file, it told him almost nothing, and now he could not think of a way to get rid of it.

The dark green manila folder was used for car-related crimes: reckless driving, leaving the scene of an accident, destruction of speed cameras at the side of the road; driving while drunk or speaking on the *telefonino* or, far more dangerous, texting. In a city with no automobiles, crimes of this sort were seldom brought to the attention of the Venice Questura.

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The folder, however, also contained cases involving the illegal acquisition of documents: vehicle registration, insurance, driver's licence, driving test results. Even though these documents had to be registered at the central office in Mestre, any illegal attempt to obtain them, as was common with any crime committed in the joined cities, was reported to the Venice police.

Most of the folder's weight was currently due to an incident on the mainland. After reading the first report, Brunetti had been left with renewed respect for the endless creativity of his fellow man. The crime had originally been detected in the hospital in Mestre, where, over the course of only two days, five men presented themselves to Pronto Soccorso with miniature radio receivers implanted so deep in their ears that they were unable to remove them and had no choice but to go to the hospital. When examined, all of the men were discovered also to have transmitting equipment taped on to their abdomens and miniature cameras attached to their chests, the lenses peeking out through their buttonholes.

Because four of them were Pakistani and none of them spoke much Italian, a translator and then the police were called. All five men, it turned out, had enrolled in the same driving school in Mestre and had previously failed the verbal test, during which they had been asked to explain the meaning of certain road signs. The transmitters, the police later discovered, had been taped to their abdomens by men sent from the driving school, the same men who had inserted the tiny transmitters deep into their ears. During the test, the buttonhole cameras had relayed the signs the men had been asked to identify to distant helpers, who in turn whispered into their ears the meanings of the signs displayed by the examiners.

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And thus they passed their exam and were given their driver's licences.

The service cost two or three thousand Euros and had probably, until detected, managed to put hundreds of unqualified drivers behind the wheel, not only of automobiles, but of long-distance trucks and articulated vehicles.

Given that Brunetti could think of no one who had not already seen the file, he decided to keep it on his desk, like a car that could not escape a traffic jam unless its driver had the courage to slip into the emergency lane until it reached the next exit.

He sometimes thought he kept it there to remind himself of how clever people could be, at least in inventing ways to make money.

His phone rang. 'The Vice-Questore has arrived, Commissario,' Signorina Elettra told him in the voice she used when Patta stood near her desk.

'I'll be there immediately,' Brunetti answered and got to his feet.

He found the autumnally tanned Patta in front of Signorina Elettra's desk, speaking with her about his schedule for the afternoon. Today, Patta wore a dark grey suit Brunetti had never seen before; while he waited for them to finish, Brunetti directed his attention to it. He studied the silent caress the jacket gave to Patta's broad shoulders, the gentle fall of the cloth of the single pleat. His glance ran down the sleeves of the jacket and fell upon the button-holes at the cuffs. Yes, they were hand-sewn, a detail that always won Brunetti's sartorial admiration.

Patta's black shoes, as well, had obviously been made for him, the tiny holes decorating the toes serving only to accent the smoothness of the leather. The laces had

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tassels. It was difficult for Brunetti to admit how much he admired those shoes.

'Ah, good morning, Commissario,' Patta said amiably. 'Do come into my office.' Over the years, Brunetti had come to believe that Patta adjusted his pronunciation to the importance of the person with whom he spoke. With the Questore, Patta spoke an Italian of impeccable purity, more Tuscan than any Tuscan was capable of. It was the same voice he used with Signorina Elettra. His Palermitano accent thickened in direct proportion to the diminishing importance of the person with whom he spoke. Odd vowel sounds began to appear, 'i' landed on the end of feminine nouns; double 'll's' were transmuted into double 'dd's'; the 'Madonna' became the 'Maronna', and 'bello' became 'beddu'. Sometimes the initial 'i' in words disappeared, only to scamper back into place at the sight of a person of higher station. From the clear Italian of Patta's greeting, Brunetti judged himself to have been promoted a few rungs, a promotion good sense told him would be temporary.

Patta entered the office first and left it to Brunetti to close the door behind them. The Vice-Questore turned towards his desk but then changed direction and sat in one of the chairs in front of it, leaving Brunetti to choose one of the others.

When they were seated, Patta began: 'I'd like to speak to you frankly, Commissario.' Brunetti ignored the chance this remark gave him to ask how Patta had spoken to him in the past and, instead, adopted a pleasant, interested expression. At least Patta had wasted no time with preliminaries.

'It's about a leak,' Patta said.

'Leak?' Brunetti asked, resisting the urge to look at the ceiling.

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'From the Questura,' Patta continued.

Ah, that kind of leak, Brunetti told himself and wondered what Patta had in mind. Nothing embarrassing had appeared in either *Il Gazzettino* or *La Nuova di Venezia* for some time, so Brunetti was without advance warning about the information leaking from the Questura.

Uncertain how to respond to Patta's remark, Brunetti returned his glance to his superior's jacket and the hand-stitched buttonholes. Beauty was where you found it, and it was always comforting to see.

'What is it, Commissario?' Patta asked with a return to his normal inquisitorial tone.

Without hesitation, and perhaps for the first time in years, Brunetti answered honestly. 'The buttonholes on your jacket, Signore.'

Startled, Patta pulled his right arm close to himself and stared at the cuff, almost as if he feared Brunetti intended to steal the buttons. After examining them, Patta asked, 'Yes?'

Brunetti's smile was easy and natural. 'I admire them, Vice-Questore.'

'Buttonholes?'

'Yes.'

'You can see the difference?'

'I think it's obvious,' Brunetti said. 'It's such a fine thing to see hand stitching of that quality. Like the foam on a coffee: it's not always there, and to most people it doesn't matter, but when it's there, and you see it, it makes the coffee taste better somehow.'

Patta's expression softened, and Brunetti had the strange sensation that the Vice-Questore was relieved, as at the sudden appearance of a friend in a room where he expected to see only unfamiliar faces.

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'I've found a tailor in Mogliano,' Patta revealed. He glanced across to Brunetti and said, 'I can give you his name if you like.'

'That's very kind of you, sir.'

Patta straightened his arm and pulled at the cuff of his shirt, then sat back in the chair.

Brunetti realized this was the first personal conversation they'd ever had – two men speaking as equals – and they were talking about buttonholes.

'These leaks, sir: could you tell me more about them?'

'I wanted to speak to you, Brunetti, because you know people here,' Patta said, reminding Brunetti that this was still the old Patta, for whom any information about the inner workings of the Questura was part of the Delphic Mysteries.

Brunetti waved a hand in the air, to dismiss those hidden truths Patta believed he knew or perhaps to summon them from the vasty deep.

'They talk to you,' Patta insinuated. Hearing Patta's suspicion relaxed Brunetti and told him that, though the subject might be new, the old, adversarial order had been restored. He tossed away his momentary warming towards Patta and returned to his native good sense.

'What is it you think they've been talking about, Vice-Questore?'

Patta cleared his throat with a small noise. 'I've heard rumours that some people are displeased with Lieutenant Scarpa,' Patta said, struggling, it seemed, to keep indignation from his voice. Then, more calmly, as though he considered it of lesser importance, he added, 'It also seems that someone has been talking about a person brought in for questioning.'

Get a grip here, Brunetti told himself, considering the remark about Scarpa. He despised and distrusted the

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Lieutenant and made little attempt to hide it, yet Patta seemed oblivious to this, as he was to so much else at the Questura. Best to demonstrate surprise; outrage would be too much. Perhaps with a bit of curiosity? But what about the leaks?

‘Are you at liberty to say where you got this information, sir?’

‘Both were reported to me by the Lieutenant himself,’ Patta replied.

‘Did the Lieutenant reveal his source?’

Patta hesitated a moment but then said, ‘He told me it was one of his informants.’

Brunetti rubbed at his lower lip with the fingers of his left hand. He allowed a long time to pass before he said, ‘I find it strange that an informant would learn something about the Questura that no one here seems to know about.’ After a brief pause, he suggested, ‘You might ask Signorina Elettra.’

‘I wanted to speak to you first,’ Patta said without explanation.

Brunetti nodded, as if he understood Patta’s reasoning. He probably did: Patta would be hesitant to bother Signorina Elettra with a suspicion that might be groundless. ‘Is this informant a reliable source?’ Brunetti asked.

‘How would I know a thing like that?’ Patta demanded. ‘It’s not my business to deal with informants.’ The instinct to institutional survival stilled Brunetti’s tongue. He waved his hand and nodded in agreement, then said, ‘Someone might have invented this rumour to create friction between the Lieutenant and his colleagues. There’s no doubt that the Lieutenant has won a place in the opinion of his fellow workers.’ Brunetti paused minimally and then added, while Patta was working out his precise

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meaning, 'I'd discount the reports, sir. That is, if you're asking my opinion.'

Did Patta stir uneasily in his chair? Brunetti wondered. He waited for what he considered a respectful period of time, then got to his feet. 'If there's nothing else, Vice-Questore, I'll go back to my office.'

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3

Brunetti closed the door behind him and turned to Signorina Elettra, hoping she might be able to tell him more. He was surprised to see Vianello standing beside her, leaning down and pointing to something on her computer screen. 'Ah, I see,' the Inspector said in a reverent voice. 'It's so easy.' He nodded in private satisfaction and moved away from the computer. 'I tried to do it twice, but I kept ignoring the obvious.'

Signorina Elettra moved her attention from the screen to Brunetti and raised her eyebrows in silent interrogation. He smiled and shook his head. 'There's always something to be learned from the Vice-Questore.' Then, sure of their attention, he continued. 'Dottor Patta's current suspicion is that information has leaked from the Questura.' He was curious to see how Vianello would respond. When Vianello remained silent, Brunetti added, 'He's probably been watching spy movies, or the Lieutenant has. He's the one who reported the rumour.'

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Signorina Elettra, who had turned away when Brunetti spoke, pushed a key and cleared her screen, then keyed in the front page of *Il Gazzettino*, which Brunetti had been reading on the boat. She read a few lines, glanced at Brunetti, but returned her eyes to the screen without comment. Brunetti wondered why the subject didn't interest her: gossip usually did. Perhaps her curiosity did not extend to Lieutenant Scarpa.

Vianello expelled a puff of audible disbelief. 'As if what we do here is a secret.'

Idly, eyes still on the screen, Signorina Elettra asked, 'Did he say what the leaks were about?'

Brunetti glanced at Patta's door and held up both hands, palms towards her. 'Only the suggestion that Lieutenant Scarpa is not the most popular person here.' He didn't bother to mention the other supposed leak, considering it inconsequential.

Scarpa's name had caught Signorina Elettra's attention. Suddenly smiling, she looked at Brunetti and said, 'Impossible to believe.'

Brunetti laughed and replied, 'That's exactly what I told the Vice-Questore.'

'Don't we have anything better to do than worry about the Lieutenant and phantom leaks about him?' Vianello asked.

Brunetti was about to leave, but his curiosity got the better of him and he asked, 'What were you two solving when I came in?'

Vianello and Signorina Elettra exchanged a glance, and the Inspector said, 'Go ahead. Tell him. I can take it. I'm a man.'

'It was one of his son's homework problems,' Signorina Elettra explained.

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‘Luca’s in an advanced class in computer technology,’ Vianello explained. ‘The teacher gave a problem to the students, and Luca had trouble with it, so I thought I’d work on it because the computers here are much more sophisticated. I thought I might be able to figure it out.’

‘And?’ Brunetti asked, although he suspected he already knew.

‘It was still impossible for me,’ Vianello said with a shrug.

Signorina Elettra interrupted him. ‘I had to work on it for a long time before I understood what to do.’ She turned to Vianello. ‘Did Luca find the solution?’

Vianello laughed. ‘I asked him at breakfast, and he said it came to him in the night, so he got up and worked on it until he solved it.’ He smiled, then sighed.

‘Did he get the same answer we did?’ she asked. Brunetti noted the kindness of her use of the plural.

‘I don’t know,’ Vianello said. ‘He was in a hurry. Said he’d tell me at dinner.’

They were interrupted by Alvisè’s arrival at the door. ‘Oh, there you are, Commissario,’ he said and saluted, then leaned against the door jamb, hand on his heart, panting, to show he had run up the stairs. Alvisè was the shortest man on the force: were the stairs higher for him?

‘There’s a woman downstairs who says she wants to talk to you, Commissario,’ he said with some effort.

‘It might have been easier to phone me, Alvisè,’ Brunetti suggested.

Alvisè’s face froze, his hand fell from his heart, and he stopped panting. He stood there, in the spotlight of common sense, for a few seconds before he blurted, ‘I know that, Dottore. But I wanted to show her that I knew it was important.’

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