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'You know I don't like to meddle in things,' Conte Falier told Brunetti. 'But since, in this case, he's so close to me, I feel I don't have a choice, not really.' Brunetti, seated opposite his father-in-law in one of the overripe armchairs that filled Palazzo Falier, had been listening to the older man for some time, aware of how difficult il Conte was finding it to begin telling the story he obviously wanted Brunetti to hear.

Il Conte had called him that morning and asked if Brunetti would have time to stop by and have a drink on his way home from work because there was something he'd like to ask him about. Brunetti's first response, given that it was a warm day in early spring, had been to calculate the easiest way to walk from the Questura to the *palazzo* without becoming entrapped in the by now normal migration paths of the herds of tourists. Because of the clear sky and benevolent temperature, walking up Riva degli Schiavoni would be impossible, crossing Piazza San Marco an act of madness. The vaporette coming from the Lido, however, were generally no more than jammed; not too crowded to board, so he had accepted the invitation, tossing to the winds his

usual reluctance to use public transportation when he could walk, and had taken the Number One to Ca' Rezzonico and arrived early.

'I don't like gossip,' il Conte insisted, recalling Brunetti's attention. 'Never have.'

'Then you're living in the wrong city,' Brunetti replied mildly, smiling as he said it to remove the sting. 'And probably should avoid speaking to other Venetians.'

The Count's answering smile was broad and relaxed. 'The first is not true, as you know,' he told Brunetti. Then, his smile even warmer now, he continued, 'The second might well be true, but if it is, there's nothing I can do about it: it's too late. I've known Venetians all my life.'

'Is one of them the source of this gossip about Gonzalo?' Brunetti asked, interested that his father-in-law would want to discuss gossip about his best friend and curious to know more.

'Yes. And he's a lawyer.' Perhaps thinking that Brunetti would ask him who, il Conte held up a restraining hand and said, 'It doesn't matter who told me. It's the story that's important.'

Brunetti nodded in agreement. Like most Venetians, he was accustomed to swimming in the swirling froth of information and misinformation that flowed through so much of daily life; unlike most Venetians, however, he took little pleasure in it: long and tangled experience had shown him how unreliable most of it was. Brunetti the police commissario had heard tales so scabrous they reddened his cheeks, and Brunetti the reader was familiar with Suetonius' descriptions of the pleasures of Tiberius. Brunetti the thinker, however, knew how prone Venetians were to exaggerate the deeds of those they'd never met, how careless of the consequences of what they blithely repeated, how fundamentally unreliable they were.

He was certainly interested in what people did, but he seldom believed they had actually done it until he had accumulated

sufficient evidence. Thus whatever his father-in-law might have been told was, to Brunetti, a case to be proven, not a truth to be believed.

While he waited for il Conte to make up his mind about how to tell him, Brunetti's own thoughts turned to a decision the family had been avoiding and postponing for years: what to do with the family villa near Vittorio Veneto, which il Conte and la Contessa no longer used and where Brunetti's family had all but stopped going during the summer. As the family dithered, water had started to seep in under the north-facing windows, and the caretaker had announced he wanted a significant raise in salary.

As if he'd read Brunetti's thoughts, il Conte said, 'It's not the villa I want to talk about, however much Gonzalo sometimes reminds me of it.'

Brunetti, surprised by the comparison, said, 'I didn't know he had water coming in under his head.'

Il Conte ignored Brunetti's lack of seriousness and insisted on explaining his remark. 'You got to know them both at about the same time, Guido; you had a lot of happy times in their company; and now both of them are showing the effects of time.'

His parents-in-law's friend, Paola's godfather and unofficial uncle, Gonzalo Rodríguez de Tejada had been part of the Falier family for as long as Brunetti could remember. He had come from London for Brunetti and Paola's tenth anniversary dinner, when he had given them a piece of twelfth-century Kufic pottery, desert-pale, about the size of a salad bowl, decorated with what they had always assumed was a Koranic inscription running up the inner sides. A prescient Gonzalo had had the bowl suspended inside a Plexiglas box that could be hung on the wall and thus help the bowl avoid the assaults and accidents that afflict any house with small children. It still hung on the wall of

the living room, between the two windows that gave a distant view to the bell tower of San Marco.

In recent years, Brunetti and Gonzalo had occasionally met on the street, or in a shop, or a café, and they had always been happy, chatty times spent drinking *un'ombra* or a coffee. They'd met by chance some months before on the street near Campo Santi Apostoli. When he entered the *campo*, Brunetti saw Gonzalo coming towards him, a hand raised in salutation, and noticed that the older man's hair had passed from iron to snow, although as he approached Brunetti, his back was as upright as a drill sergeant's, and his glance still a piercing blue, perhaps the trace left behind by some Northern invader of Spain.

They'd embraced, said how glad they were to see one another, the older man adding – speaking in an Italian entirely devoid of accent – that he was late for an appointment and couldn't stop to talk, but to say hello to Paola and the kids, and kiss them all for him.

He'd touched Brunetti's cheek with his hand in a sign of affection he often used, then said he really had to go, turned and walked away quickly towards Fondamenta Nuove and the *palazzo* where he lived. Brunetti had stood still and watched him go, happy to have seen him, as he was always happy to see Gonzalo. He had resumed walking, and then, for no particular reason, paused and turned to look for the retreating back of the man making his way through the crowds. At first, looking for someone walking quickly, Brunetti had failed to see him, but then he'd noticed a tall form, moving away, but slowly, head bowed, elbow jutting out, one hand placed on his hip, as though to quell some secret pain. Brunetti glanced away immediately, as though he'd come upon the man doing something embarrassing and wanted not to see him do it.

Pulling himself back from his reverie, Brunetti saw that il Conte was watching him carefully. The older man asked, 'When did you last see him?'

'A couple of months ago, perhaps a bit more,' Brunetti answered. 'We met in Santi Apostoli but only for long enough to say hello.'

'How did he seem to you?'

'He seemed like his old self, I'd say,' Brunetti answered, automatically defending one old man from having to hear that a friend had succumbed to the forces that were lying in wait for both of them.

Avoiding il Conte's gaze, Brunetti studied the portrait of a young gentleman hanging on the far wall and felt his gaze returned. Vibrant with youth, muscles screaming to be freed of the stillness demanded by his pose, he stood with his left hand on his hip, the other on the pommel of his sword. No doubt he was an ancestor of Paola, some distant Falier who had died in battle, or of disease, or drink, leaving behind this image of himself to show what he had been when he had been.

Brunetti saw, perhaps fancifully, some traces of Paola's face in the young man's, though hundreds of years had softened the angles in hers, leaving only – at least in times of sudden anger – the hawk's eye seeking its prey.

'You really had no time to talk?'

Brunetti shook his head.

Il Conte lowered his glance, pressed both hands on his thighs and kept his eyes on them. What a handsome man he still was, Brunetti thought. He took the opportunity provided by il Conte's obvious distraction to have a closer look at him and was surprised to realize that his father-in-law had grown smaller since the last time they'd met. No, since the last time he had paid attention to the older man's appearance. Though his shoulders were narrower, il Conte's jacket still held those thinner shoulders in a

soft embrace. Perhaps he had had it altered, but then Brunetti noticed that it had that year's lapels and so was new.

Il Conte continued to study the back of his hands, as if looking for an answer there, then he glanced across at Brunetti and said, 'Your situation is always ambiguous, isn't it, Guido?'

Was that a question, Brunetti asked himself, or a statement of the Conte's opinion? Did it refer to the difference in rank between him, the son of a man from the lower classes whose life had been a series of defeats, and his wife, daughter of il Conte Falier and heiress to one of the largest fortunes in the city? Or perhaps between his professional responsibilities and the demands that friendship and love might make upon him? Or was it his situation as a commissario of police married into the family of this man before him, whose business dealings might not bear close examination?

Unwilling to ask to what part of his life il Conte was referring, Brunetti temporized by saying, 'I think many of us lead ambiguous lives. The world we live in makes that necessary.'

The older man nodded and moved his hands to the arms of his chair, where they rested easily. 'I remember, years ago, Paola came home for a visit while she was at university in England. Most of the time she was here, she was reading a book she had to write a paper about.' His face softened at the memory of his only child, home from school, doing her homework.

Brunetti waited, familiar with the Conte's narrative habits.

'It wasn't until the third day that she talked about the book and what she wanted to say in her essay.'

'What did she tell you?' Why, he wondered, are we always so interested in the past experiences of our best beloved?

'That I should read it,' the Conte revealed. 'I tried to, but not until she'd gone back to England.' He shook his head as if confessing something. 'I'm not drawn to that sort of thing – it was a religious book – and I couldn't read it.'