

# RUINS *of Grandeur*

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*Ruins of Grandeur*

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## *Preface*

It has been my good fortune to have spent sufficient time in Venice to capture some of the fascination this uniquely engineered city has long engendered among those who come to pay homage to its glorious past, and partake in its uncertain future. There is a decadent splendor about Venice unequaled in the modern world. Its melancholy character has evolved as a direct result of its fabled history and its constant struggle to survive the fickle whims of nature to which it is forever hostage. It is only through the courage, persistence and resignation of its inhabitants and its benefactors worldwide that the beauty that is unique to *La Serenissima* is preserved.

Foremost, Venice is a city of facades, a carnival mask that disguises the true identity of its wearer. Like the pungent fragrance of its wisteria, an aura of self-indulgence and intrigue wafts through the city. If you are curious — and those who come to Venice usually are — explore its maze of narrow streets, its meander of canals, and its complex of campos, and your eyes will feast on sensuality unrivaled anywhere on earth.

# ONE

Inside Madrid's Prado Museum a Goya is slashed to ribbons; the perpetrator escapes. Later a Basque terrorist group claims responsibility. In the Netherlands a Vermeer vanishes from a museum in The Hague; the culprit is unknown. In South Beach, Miami, a film star is murdered for a Salvador Dali that once adorned his living room wall. Authorities in London confiscate fake Etruscan figurines from a London dealer's showroom; their origin is traced to a hastily abandoned workshop outside Florence. In Osaka a Japanese businessman pays twenty million dollars to a Canadian swindler for a skillful forgery of a Gauguin falsely documented as the original. Pre-Colombian jade offered for sale by a prestigious New York auction gallery is impounded by customs agents after a complaint filed by the Peruvian Government claims the jade has been looted from a Moche gravesite. Terrorism, theft, murder, forgery, greed and pillage! Welcome to the seamy underbelly of the art world where everything and everybody is fair game; a world I'm a part of, except I'm one of the good guys.

My name is Peter Grant and I'm a New York-based fine arts expert. I sell my expertise to a highly select clientele including international auction houses, prestigious museums, major art dealers and exceedingly rich collectors.

Occasionally major corporations and insurance companies retain my services. My work mainly involves authentication, but sometimes I'm hired to find works of art *gone missing*, a discreet terminology that refers to rare paintings or masterful sculptures that have been stolen. These purloined objects are usually pricey works of art and, more often than not, priceless. I'm known for my *good eye*, as they say in the trade, which means I'm usually able to spot things that aren't *quite right*; forgeries, for example, some tediously blatant, others tantalizingly brilliant. The challenge, of course, is to recognize the handiwork of the forger and to expose him or her, as the case may be. Because of my *good eye*, my prowess with tools of the trade — x-rays, infrared and ultra-violet light scanners, spectroscopes and chemical analyzers — and my inclination for discretion, I'm generally in demand. Although I'm technically an art detective, I personally prefer *art sleuth*; it has a more sophisticated ring to it, more Hercule Poirot, let's say, than Sam Spade.

During the summer my clients scatter to posh retreats, socializing in Southampton, basking in Bermuda, or cruising off Cannes. Relaxing and entertaining are uppermost in their minds, not fine art. Thus, after Independence Day I find myself in a nearly deserted city along with its eerily quiet museums and its shuttered auction houses and art galleries. When my wife, Claire, and I were together we always had summer plans, but after our separation I find I'm not terribly gung-ho about doing things alone. These days I feel a tad lonely, perhaps even a bit depressed. And unless something interesting crops up, I guess I'll just muddle through the summer malaise by myself, albeit at glacial speed.

Following my traditional 4<sup>th</sup> of July rooftop bash for friends and clients, I wake up enervated from everyone bragging about their fabulous vacation plans, wilted from the oppressive heat and humidity,

and bowed but unbroken from an excess of champagne. I chase down two aspirin with a glass of ice water and resolve to settle into my summer torpor with breakfast and a good novel, when I'm rudely interrupted by a most unexpected telephone call from London.

"Peter Grant here."

"Colin Marshall of Lloyd's, old chap. I'll get right to it, Peter. We need you in Venice, chop-chop, as they say. You must endeavor to recover several Renaissance oils, including a Bellini masterpiece, stolen from the palazzo of one of our clients, an Austrian Archduke. We're staring down the barrel of a loaded gun and should it go off it will blow an immense crater in our corporate wallet."

"I see." Colin is his usual dramatic self.

"I'm authorized to offer a generous retainer, thirty thousand quid and reasonable expenses, of course."

"Book it," I reply without hesitation.

"Lovely, Peter. My regards to your *smashing* Claire."

"Of course," I reply. Colin hasn't a clue about my breakup with Claire, for which I'm thankful. The bloke, though married, has a roving eye and, as I'm reliably informed, a rather remarkable 'bird to bed' ratio. Anyhow, the theft of paintings from an Austrian Archduke's palazzo sounds rather like my cup of tea, which will spare me boredom and possible cremation in the "Baked Apple." While I'm not keen about the heat, the crowds and the fetid canals during the height of Venice's tourist season, I have nonetheless agreed to venture forth. In addition to a handsome fee, I have a most compelling personal urge to go. The trip provides me an excuse to see the stunning, husky-voiced former fashion model who is my estranged wife. Claire, it so happens, resides in *La Serenissima's* melancholy splendor, except when she's cavorting about the continent with a bizarre assortment of male admirers.

In spite of our breakup and Claire's quirky, often outrageous behavior, I'm still terribly in love with her. She's enchanting to look at, tall and slender with smooth golden skin and long blonde hair. She's curious and intelligent, affectionate and funny, direct and demanding, spontaneous, and, as I mentioned, quite unpredictable. For six years we seemed the ideal couple, close friends and ardent lovers when,

without warning, she suddenly bolted. Despite her hasty exit, I'd like to try to convince her to come back.

## Two

Seeking relief from a hazy Adriatic sun that wilts me on the choppy passage by water taxi from Marco Polo Airport to the fabled island Republic looming mirage-like in the distance in pinkish splendor, I instruct the driver to deposit me at the vaporetto stop nearest Harry's Bar.

Motoring into the Canal di Cannaregio on the approach to the Grand Canal I experience my usual feeling of wonderment. I think the feeling has to do with Venice seeming more fantasy than reality, an ancient, crumbling city out of place in a modern world. Hauntingly beautiful, it occupies a time warp of romantic decadence that has miraculously survived thirteen centuries of tumultuous conflicts and nature's caprices. Venice rests upon oak and larch poles that were long ago rammed into the sediments and clay of one hundred eighteen islets now segmented by one hundred seventy-seven serpentine canals, and reconnected by more than four hundred picturesque bridges each as individual as any member of the human race. Little wonder then that every visitor who walks this maze gets lost!

Cruising along the Grand Canal, I never cease to be awestruck as I gaze at the decaying splendor of the ornate *palazzi*. How those ancient waterlogged foundation posts continue to bear the massive weight of all that Istrian stone, brick, marble, terrazzo, wood, stucco and tile is itself a mystery. The very thought staggers my imagination as does a guess at the sum required for annual maintenance, which no doubt accounts for the shabby appearance of many elegant *palazzi*. Grudgingly, many houses have been abdicated to wealthy foreigners who can best afford to keep them afloat, while attempting to restore them to their former magnificence.

Behind the opulent facades of the Grand Canal's architecture my mind recalls what my eyes cannot see, the dark labyrinth of narrow passageways and sunny campos with their unique and mysterious-looking wells upon which stray cats snooze on sun-drenched lids. Here and there ancient brick reveals itself, exposed by crumbling stucco. Gray-haired grandmothers peer from open windows, their faces framed by peeling shutters while, inside, TV sets blare incessantly. Above the narrow passageways flap the pigeons and the ubiquitous laundry. Strung out to dry, clothing and undergarments undulate suggestively in the breeze. And everywhere there are flowers; white roses cascade over brick walls, geraniums thrust brazen pink and red blossoms skyward from earthen pots, purple wisteria dangles in pungent profusion like a tangled arbor lush with grapes. Already I detect or perhaps just imagine the familiar aromas — sewage, floral attar, fresh bread, dead fish, garlic, mildew and Gorgonzola — smells all tinged with salt air from vast greenish-colored lagoons.

Before I realize it I stand aboard a floating dock within a stone's throw of the scenic Piazzetta of St. Mark's Square with its Egyptian granite columns and brick Campanile, and in the background the ornate, Moorish-looking Doge's Palace and the golden domes of St. Mark's Basilica. The water taxi driver relieves me of a vast sum of lire, or so it seems. Then he whisks me and my luggage forty meters away to the frosted glass entry to Harry's Bar where, now secure

within its frigid Spartan interior, I quickly forgive the Venetians their oppressive heat.

The bartender greets me with a vulpine grin and a roguish wink. To him I am *the other Mr. Grant*. Prior to my arrival at this idyllic oasis Claudio had been on intimate terms with a previous Mr. Grant, Cary, who lived in Venice when married to the Woolworth heiress, Barbara Hutton. Referring to me as *the other Mr. Grant* is Claudio's way of flattering me, yet, in the same breath, reminding me of my slightly inferior status. Not that I'm offended, mind you. Quite the contrary, I feel complimented by his casual acceptance of me as a *regular*.

In Harry's, I always feel a swelling of self-importance as Claudio, surrounded by his faithful clack, orchestrates cocktails the way Luciano Pavarotti sings arias. As I perch atop a barstool Claudio loudly exclaims, "*Ah, the other Mr. Grant...buon giorno...come stai?*"

Once, very briefly, I was a Wall Street stockbroker. In New York Stock Exchange, I respond, "Oh, a half to five-eighths, Claudio, and you?"

"*Molto bene,*" he grins, catching the gist of my reply. Claudio is perceptive, unusually so, a combination of Doppler radar and ESP. Seeing the weariness etched onto my face from the overnight flight from JFK to Venice, he anticipates my need and effortlessly concocts a "Montgomery." This lethal cousin to a martini, fifteen parts gin to one part vermouth, gets its moniker from the feisty British Field Marshall of World War II who allegedly ordered his troops to advance only when they outnumbered the Axis enemy by that same ratio. Obdurate little Scotsman, that Monty!

Across the highly polished bar, Claudio slides a frosty tumbler toward my eager fingertips. Then, from his jacket pocket he extracts a ring of keys which, smugly, he dangles before my eyes. Plucking the keys to Claire's abode from his fingers I pocket them, raise my glass, and toast him, "*Grazie, Claudio...salute, amore, e ricchezza.*" For an instant patrons and tourists alike stare at me in wonderment. I have spoken like a native son. I feel acclaimed. Since my separation from Claire, nearly a year now, it's the first time I've felt much of anything besides numbness. I presume Claudio assumes we're still together and I won't tell him otherwise. It's too painful.

When he has a moment I anticipate Claudio will ask, “What brings you back to Venice?” I will fib, of course, for I’m not at liberty to reveal that Palazzo Aldrovani has been robbed of its priceless Bellini along with other art treasures. The police are keeping that information secret, at least for now. Nor will I confide that Lloyd’s has employed me to investigate the Archduke’s theft. That’s confidential. So when he asks, and eventually he does, I’m prepared. “I’m researching material at the Accademia for a coffee table book on Renaissance art,” I tell him.

“*Va bene.*” Thinking my response vapid, he smiles politely and returns to his task, creating Harry’s trademark “Bellini,” the sparkling Italian white wine called *prosecco* that he artfully combines with white peach juice. I pause to wonder whether there’s any connection between the drink and the Mannerist painter of the Archduke’s purloined masterpiece. If there is, it escapes me. I’m too exhausted to dwell on the possible coincidence. Instead I focus on how pleasant it is to once again hang out at Harry’s.

Like rice pudding, there’s something comforting about old haunts and one’s acceptance as an habitu , even though one appears sporadically or perhaps only after a long absence. It’s reassuring to know what to expect — a bracing, friendly atmosphere with no surprises. A home away from home, home in my case being my two-bedroom Beekman Place Co-op where, prior to my departure, I had summoned up sufficient courage to telephone Claire.

“Claire, I’ve just accepted an assignment from Lloyd’s. They’ve asked me to try to recover some paintings that were stolen from a Venetian palazzo several days ago. It’s all very hush-hush, so please, not a word. I’m flying over day after tomorrow. I was hoping you might let me stay with you.”

“You may have my place all to yourself, Peter. I’m leaving for Switzerland in the morning. No one in their right mind stays in Venice during July and August with this ghastly heat, the dreadful mosquitoes, and the hoards of tourists.”

“Thanks, Claire, that’s kind of you. I accept, but I’m crushed I won’t get to see you.”

“Well, if you’re still here when I return in September we’ll get together.”

“I doubt I’ll be in Venice that long.”

“Peter, you sound down. Are you all right?”

“Yeah...just disappointed. By the way, Claire, how will I get the keys to your place?”

“Suppose I leave them at Harry’s...with Claudio.”

“*Perfetto*,” I reply in Italian, cheerfully, in an effort to mask my shattered expectations. “I hope you enjoy your summer,” I tell her. But I really don’t mean it for I suspect she’s going off with...*a friend*.

“Thanks. Oh, Peter, I’ll leave you my real estate lady’s number in case anything goes haywire or you need anything. Her name is Cinzia...and she’s very attractive.”

“Trying to fix me up, are you? Take my mind off you while you’re gone, is that it?”

“No, I...Oh shit, Peter, I don’t really know. You might like her, everyone does. She’s your type: dependable, cultured, conservative and elegant, not disorganized and flighty like me.”

I can’t tell whether she’s serious or just having a momentary lapse of self-esteem because she feels guilty about going off with...*a friend*.

“And one other thing, please don’t disturb Franco.”

“Franco! Jesus, Claire, who’s Franco?” My mind conjures up some Italian stallion who shares the rent and certain other amenities I prefer not to dwell on.

“Your first line of defense against mosquitoes, my pet house spider.”

“Oh, that Franco! Uh, what’s he look like? You know, so I’ll recognize him when I run into him?”

“He’s shiny black with long, spindly legs and he lives in a lovely web in the corner of the ceiling over the bookcase. Make sure when you leave that the window’s ajar so he’s able to catch bugs.”

Disbelieving, I shake my head and mutter to myself, *I hate spiders. God, I hope Franco hasn’t got a red hourglass on his thorax!*

I locate Claire’s flat in a five-story house in Campo Santa Stefano, a lovely square near the Accademia Bridge with its usual medieval cistern,

marble statue of a patriot, and the requisite number of parish churches and outdoor cafés. The house, sandwiched between others resembling it, has a seasoned Renaissance look about it; a charming tilt, stress cracks, patches of exposed brick, and crazed stucco that has weathered to a pale hue of canary yellow. Viewing the ancient structure which I figure dates to the fifteenth century causes my imagination to run amok. I envision the richly robed Marco Polo standing on its threshold as he regales a throng with his adventures. What an imagination! No more Montgomerys for me after an all-night flight from the Big Apple.

Dragging my weary bones and suitcases, I stagger up worn marble stairs, concave from centuries of use. When I'm able to breathe normally again, I realize the staircase has taken its toll. Without the least thought of unpacking, seeking out Franco, or brushing my teeth I stumble into the bedroom and collapse onto the bed. As I think about Colin's request, to telephone the Questura in the morning, I fall into an exhausted sleep, still dressed in my clothes.