

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Set Fire to Sicily

Jane Heritage

‘We’ll be a republic by Whitsuntide,’ said Blasio. His wrestler’s face was glowing with hope. ‘No more King, Charles or Pere. Government for the people.’

The others were all nodding and murmuring with eagerness, but I was puzzled by the timing. Did they mean to rise against the French, or didn’t they? ‘Whitsuntide?’ I said. ‘That could be too late. All the French in the island will have gone to attack Constantinople.’

Andrea looked at me with narrow eyes. ‘If you want to help us kill Frenchmen,’ he said slowly, ‘I promise you you’ll have your chance. Before the Angevin fleet sails for Corfu we will attack. They won’t know what’s hit them.’

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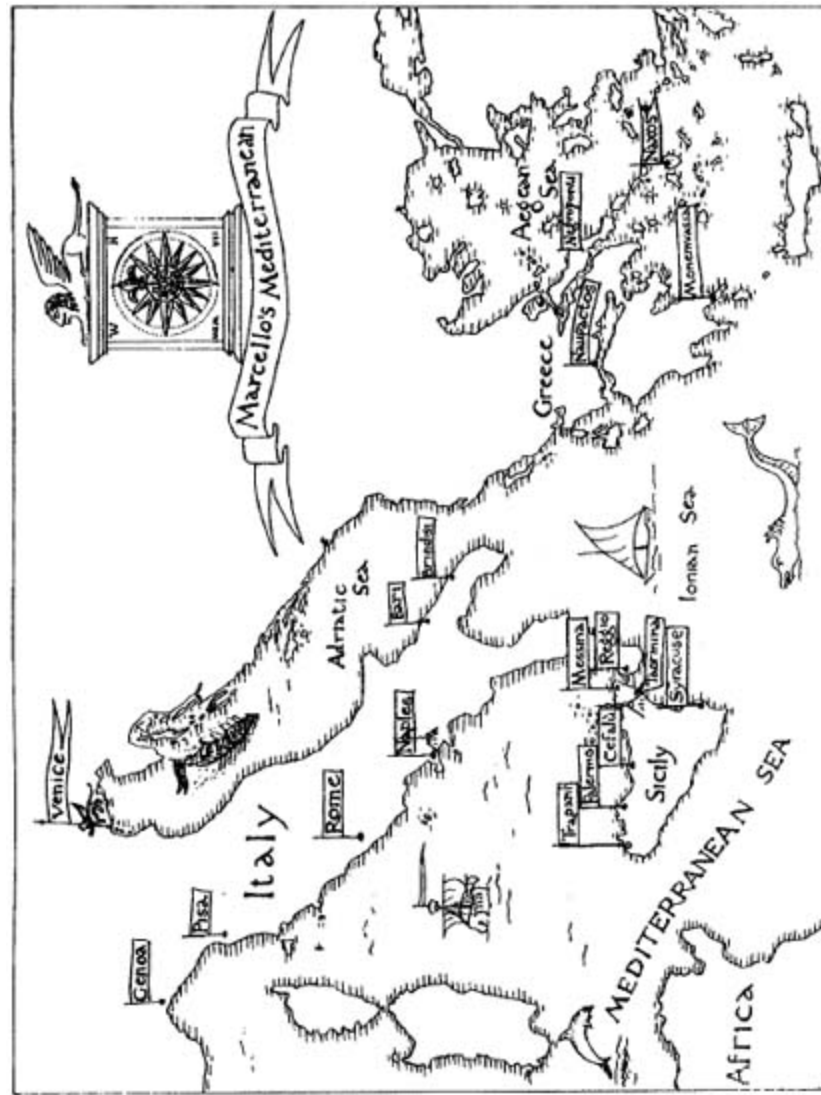
A Marcello D'Estari Story

Jane Heritage

The Virgin logo, featuring the word "Virgin" in a stylized, handwritten script font.

Dedication

Edessa, where it began



SET FIRE TO SICILY

DECEMBER 1281

ONE

OUR ORDERS WOULD be waiting in Naxos. If we ever got there.

The Aegean was getting its breath together for a real winter storm, and there was nowhere on the Greek mainland where our galley could take refuge. The ports and castles were back under Byzantine control, and the Byzantines have no love for Venice. We had to make the Cyclades, or risk ending up on a Greek gallows. The crew looked askance at me. It was my fault that they were in this mess.

The wind came straight down from the Steppes. The snow it carried turned to sleet and stung our faces, and the seas were choppy and dangerous. The rowers stood by their shipped oars, wincing every time a wave struck us. A big enough wave could break every oar. We shouldn't even have left port in such heavy weather.

We scudded before the wind under a storm sail. The galley cleaved through the waves, shipping so much water that the master set the rowers to bailing out through the rowing-ports. The three long scarlet standards, embroidered with the golden Lion of St Mark, snapped and rattled above our heads. The sky looked murderous.

At last our lookout screeched, 'Naxos, sir! Port beam!'

'Port beam? By God -' The captain hurried to the rail and stared out through the gloom. There was Naxos, to the north, with Paros beside it. The wind had driven us almost past the channel that led to the harbour.

For three breaths the captain stared in silence. I knew what he was thinking. If we passed Naxos there was no safe harbour for leagues, and the rising sea would swamp us. But if he used the oars in this heavy sea to try to row us into the

channel, he risked snapping every blade, killing the rowers, leaving the ship helpless.

He turned from the rail, his jaw set, and roared, 'Oars!' After a beat of unbelieving silence the master below deck shouted the orders and the oars rattled down from the rowing-ports. I could have stayed with the captain, but I hate having nothing to do when there's trouble. I ran below deck and found an unmanned oar. It made the wound on my arm open up again, but it was better than waiting to drown.

The rowing-master nodded approvingly when he saw me keeping the stroke. I knew what I was about. I was a rower myself once, when I was eighteen and wanted to see the world and forget how miserable I was.

I needed all the experience I had got. The ship was heeling so violently that sometimes our blades missed the sea entirely, and there was water around our ankles. But we were rowing for our lives. We heaved and sweated and at last we turned her in the teeth of the wind and just managed to crawl in to the channel between Paros and Naxos. It was a little calmer there, and in less than an hour we brought her in behind the safety of the big new mole protecting Naxos harbour. We rested on the oars and coasted across the still water and everyone on board sighed, officers, sailors, rowers and me.

I left the rowers congratulating each other and walked up to join the captain under the awning on the stern. The exercise had made me sticky, but I slung my fur-lined cloak around my shoulders to keep off the cold blowing rain. I jerked my head at the town before us and said, 'Looks good.'

Naxos town was a fine sight, and not just because we had barely reached it. The renegade Venetian Dukes of Naxos were great builders, and there was a good modern harbour sheltered behind the mole, complete with wharves, berths, splendid brick-built warehouses and a small arsenal. Beyond the harbour the town spread up the hillside, a close-packed

huddle of buildings studded with the dark green of citrus trees. The lower half was old Greek, with little square houses washed in white and a domed Orthodox church. The upper town clustered around the castle, sheltered by its heavy walls, and it looked distinctly Venetian. There were seven tall stone towers belonging to the most important families on the island, a new cathedral with a campanile and brightly-polished bells, and a few big mansions with round-headed doorways and shuttered windows. In the summer the whole town would smell of myrtle, and even in cold winter rain it was attractive.

The captain was a surly devil. He didn't think much of putting his ship at risk to rescue a spy, and he didn't deign to answer me. We examined the other shipping in silence. There were Naxian and Venetian merchantmen warped into the quay and the usual covey of fishing smacks pulled up on the beach. And in one quiet corner there was a lean, small, fit-looking galley, as different from the round-bellied merchantmen as a greyhound from a lapdog, heeled over against the harbour wall and apparently refitting after a rough passage.

'That galley's Genoese,' said the captain pensively. I had already noticed the Genoese badge on her pennon. 'And she doesn't look exactly ship-shape.'

The sight of a Genoese galley unable to fend for itself was bound to bring out his most piratical instincts, but he was being undiplomatic. 'We aren't at war with Genoa,' I reminded him, 'and Venice's writ doesn't run here. Don't even think about it. I'm in enough trouble already.'

He looked at me as if I was adding insult to injury. 'If the Doge had the brains he was born with, he'd ban the sons of whores from all our ports.'

'I'm sure that he'd love to. But the Duke of Naxos doesn't take orders from the Doge.' Which is ironic, when you consider that the original Duke of Naxos, Marco Sanudo, was given the Duchy eighty years back because he was the then

Doge's nephew. That particular piece of nepotism miscarried. Sanudo promptly developed delusions of grandeur and declared the Cyclades independent. So while we might feel irritated to see our deadly rivals the Genoese brazenly refitting in Naxos town, there wasn't much we could do about it. And if you ask me, this proves that whenever a man sees the chance to grab individual power, he forgets his loyalties, his principles and his friends. Kings, dukes, emperors, they're all the same.

We berthed without incident and the captain announced his intention of going straight up to the Venetian residency by the Castello for his orders. That was fine by me. One of the advantages of operating undercover is that somebody else gets to do the dull administration. We agreed a rendezvous and I sauntered off along the harbour front to find a bite to eat. I had left a débâcle behind me in Monemvasia on the mainland, my arm was aching with the cold, and I wanted comforting.

I like Naxos. The Sanudi keep it clean and tidy, and because it isn't Venetian it is not a main trading station, so it doesn't stink of pigs and cargoes the way the great bases of Modon and Coron do. If the weather had been fair I would have enjoyed a stroll along the harbour front, but it was windy and threatening rain. Like a homing pigeon, I headed straight for my favourite tavern.

I have travelled around the Mediterranean for the last ten years, and in all my regular ports I know where to turn for company. Naxos is fairly small, so as far as I'm concerned it's a one-girl town. Two would have been bound to find out about each other, which is a recipe for aggravation. The current girl worked at the Golden Lion tavern, which was situated conveniently close to the harbour and served Venetian specialities fit to make a sailor homesick.

The tavern was busy, like all places with a roof when it rains. It was full of fishermen and sailors, with a fair sprinkling of landmen and even a couple of Greek priests in

black robes. Their tall hats almost brushed against the smoky roof-beams. I managed to find an unoccupied seat in a warm corner by the fire. The place smelled of fish stew and the customers. There were cats everywhere, and a lean silver tabby with eyes like almonds came and wreathed itself around my ankles on the off chance that I might order something to eat. The landlord emerged from behind a barrel of Cyprus wine, looking harassed. I asked for a plate of fish stew and a jug of red.

A boy brought the wine at once with half a loaf of bread. I was hungry, and I dipped the bread in the wine while I waited for my meal. The smell of the stew was making my mouth water. One of the Orthodox priests was absorbing a large bowl of it, filtering it noisily through his beard. Disgusting.

A round, dirty hand put a loaded plate in front of me and soft lips brushed my ear. I looked up smiling into Gratosia's face. She looked like one of the cats, furry and almond-eyed. There was a cooking smut next to her snub nose. She said in a voice that was throaty with welcome, 'Welcome, Marcello.'

'Gratosia!' A roar from behind the barrel of Cyprus wine. The landlord was her father, of course. He never liked me. I turned up from time to time, spent thinly and devalued his daughter. She glanced over her shoulder and then said quickly, 'Come round the back when you're done.'

The stew was good. I took my time over it. I've always found that anticipation enhances satisfaction. When I had finished I gave the bones to the cat, tossed a Venetian coin onto the table and went out the front door. Then I circled purposefully around the low dingy building and went in again at the back.

Gratosia was waiting for me. She put her finger to her lips and caught hold of my hand, towing me back out of the door and across the little frowsty courtyard to the storehouse. We'd been there before. I kissed her eagerly as the door closed. She tasted of steam and cooking, a comforting taste.

I eased her down onto a heap of flour sacks and lowered my body onto her. She was as warm as new bread and had more curves than the plump bags of flour. I was already hard for her. It was cold in the storehouse, but she begged me to take my damp tunic off and told me that she would keep me warm. When I obliged she saw the bandage on my arm and fussed over it for a while, but I hadn't come to her for medical advice. I kissed her again and put my hand inside her coarse dress and she decided not to worry about my wound.

Her thighs opened to admit me, soft and white and welcoming. As she had promised, I didn't notice the cold. Warmth distilled from her plump body underneath me and her silken flesh around me, and soon I was panting and sweating with effort. She liked me to be fierce. I bit her neck like a mating tom cat and she wailed and dug her dirty nails into my labouring buttocks. I snarled with pleasure and pounded into her so hard that ripples flowed up her dimpled body every time I lunged. When I dragged myself out of her, only just in time, I roared like a bull.

Afterwards I lay on her, breathless and dripping. She held on to me and said, 'Are you staying this time?'

She always asked me, though the answer was always the same. I pulled back from her and pushed my damp hair out of my eyes. 'Just passing through, *mia cara*.'

Her round breasts lifted and fell with a sigh. 'You don't care about me.'

'Of course I do.' No word of a lie. I've never had a woman I wasn't fond of. Well, that's not strictly true. Not for ten years, anyway. 'But my business keeps me travelling, sweetheart. You know I come here when I can.'

'My father wants me to get wed.' That was a common threat, too.

'Luck to the bride, then. What shall I give you as a bride-gift?'

‘Oh, Marcellino, I hate you.’ She caught hold of me and pulled me down on top of her to prove how much she hated me.

I emerged a little later, combing my hair with my fingers and tugging down my tunic. I felt pleasantly weary and much, much better. There’s nothing like a vigorous bout of uncomplicated, earthy fornication to take your mind from a brush with death. Gratirosa’s future husband would have his work cut out if he was going to keep up with her. I could see him having more horns than a snail.

The captain and I were due to meet at a harbourside tavern as the bells rang for Vespers. It was coming on to dark now and I went back towards the harbour, lifting the hood of my cloak against the strengthening rain. Thanks to Gratirosa I wasn’t feeling the cold. I emerged onto the harbour front near the little Genoese galley and stood in the shadows under a Chandler’s awning to watch them working on her.

‘Well met. Or maybe not,’ said a voice in Genoese dialect. I concealed a start and turned to look into a face I knew well.

‘Daniele,’ I said, not smiling. I can speak Genoese, but I replied in Venetian. ‘Small sea, isn’t it?’

‘Were you on the galley that came in today?’ We must have looked like colleagues as much as rivals. We were both dressed in quiet, unremarkable clothes, long hooded cloaks and dark tunics of sober-coloured cloth and soft short boots. Agents don’t often get the chance to wear silk and their best jewels. We were even about the same age, just the right side of thirty, though I am dark and Daniele was tall and fair and craggy with smallpox scars. It was a shame, he should have been handsome. There but for the grace of God –

I nodded. ‘And you’re refitting,’ I said, with a jerk of my head towards the Genoese galley. ‘Had a rough trip?’

‘Coming back from the Black Sea we hit a squall. Do you want a drink?’

‘I’ve got an appointment.’ We stood for a moment in silence. Daniele was a Genoese agent, working for them as I worked for Venice. We had encountered each other often enough to know that if our cities were not enemies we would have been friends. But we kept our distance. Venice and Genoa wavered between armed peace and open war, and at any time we might be called upon to try to kill each other. Our conversation was symptomatic. He spoke in his dialect, I spoke in mine.

Presently Daniele said, ‘The word is out that Venice and King Charles of Anjou are planning to invade the Byzantine Empire.’

‘Everybody knows it,’ I agreed, ‘since we signed the treaty.’

‘You really think that Venice can win back a half and a quarter of the Empire?’ He shook his head. ‘It won’t happen.’

‘Why not? Charles of Anjou and Venice make a strong combination. And the Emperor has troubles all over the East. He’s a sitting duck.’

‘Even if you beat the Emperor, Charles will make sure that he gets the lion’s share, the wily French fox.’

Now Daniele might have something there. I would personally have preferred the Republic to win back its possessions without the help of a king, and especially the cold, ambitious, unprincipled Charles of Anjou. But the Council of Forty believed that Charles would make a good ally, and who was I to disagree? ‘We can manage him,’ I said, with more conviction than I felt.

‘I bet you ten florins it all comes to nothing by this time next year.’

That made me suspicious. I looked hard into Daniele’s narrow blue eyes. ‘You know something I don’t? Are you betting on a certainty?’

‘Oh, come on, Marcello.’ He opened his big bony hands, the picture of innocence. ‘That wouldn’t be honourable,

would it? I swear I have no information you couldn't get.'

I didn't really think he would lie to me, not on a wager at least, but ten florins is a lot of money. I hesitated, and Daniele grinned. 'Are you a man or a mouse?' he demanded. 'Any patriotic Venetian would jump at the chance of a quick profit.'

'Done, you dog.' I spat on my hand and held it out and he took it. We had never shaken hands before. It felt strange.

Behind us the bells began to ring for Vespers. I glanced over my shoulder and detached myself from Daniele. 'I have to go. See you around the Mediterranean.'

'If I win my bet, I'll be in touch,' he called after me. 'This time next year, Marcello. Remember it.'

He sounded hellishly confident. I felt uncomfortable, as if there was a hole in my purse and I was leaving a trail of lost coins behind me in the muddy street.

Two

JANUARY RAIN AND a high tide do not make the best of Venice. However, the miserable weather suited my mood. The Security Committee had summoned me and I wasn't looking forward to it. It is never pleasant to give an explanation of failure.

There weren't any boats about, so I walked from my house through the narrow submerged streets, jumping from doorway to doorway to try to keep the water from my boots. I had been summoned to appear before the second bell, and my route should have been full of the bustle of one of the great trading and manufacturing centres of the world: weavers, carpenters, smiths of every sort, ivory carvers, intarsia-makers and mosaicists all busily at work in their workshops, apprentices and messenger boys running to and fro, women doing the shopping or snatching an opportunity to gossip between one window and the next. But everywhere was deathly quiet. When I emerged onto the Piazzetta, the small square that links the Piazza San Marco to the Lagoon, I understood why.

The crowds had to be seen to be believed. People stood shoulder to shoulder in six inches of water. The rain was thickened with a veil of sweaty steam. The west side of the Piazzetta, opposite the Doge's Palace and next to the Campanile, is lined with three-storey brick buildings with handsome arcades, and people of the better sort were hanging out of the windows and dangling from walls and balconies, wherever they could get a grip. I glanced up and saw that every window of the palace was occupied too, filled by those patricians influential enough to command a view

from the Doge's rooms. The white stone arches framed noblemen and women smothered in silk damask and fur, with gold and gems glittering on their velvet-gloved hands.

I stood for a moment, running my eyes over the faces. I didn't find who I was looking for, but I did see my father, in a good position as befitted his station as one of Venice's council of Forty patrician rulers, with his wife Isabella beside him. She was wrapped warmly in a cloak and hood lined with sable, but her cheeks were still flushed with cold. She nursed a tiny white lapdog in her fur-lined silk sleeve, while my father drank from a chased silver cup, no doubt enjoying warm spiced wine to keep the cold at bay.

He didn't see me, but I was used to that. I returned my attention to the crowd. I had missed the big Christmas procession and it wasn't Epiphany yet, so why all the excitement?

All soon became clear. Between the two marble pillars which stand on the waterfront – spoils of a war with Genoa, by the way – there was a tall scaffold erected with a stake in the centre, surrounded by piles of brushwood. An execution by burning, not common at all, and as popular a diversion as the biggest religious procession. I hadn't heard about it, but then when I arrived last night I had delivered my report to the Committee secretary and gone straight home to the luxury of a meal cooked by Lucia, a visit to the local bath house, and my own bed.

'What's going on?' I asked the man in front of me.

'Burning a bugger,' he said succinctly, without even turning round.

The penalty for proven sodomy in Venice is death at the stake. Giving them a taste in this life of what they can expect in the next, if you ask me. I would set light to the wood myself if the executioner was taken sick.

But I have never been a great execution watcher, especially when it is raining. I pushed and waded my way through the crowd towards the far side of the Piazzetta,

beside the Campanile, where the Security Committee met. They used a room in a big building otherwise completely occupied by tax collectors and customs officials, boring, subfusc people. If anyone saw you going in they assumed you were off to complain about your latest tax demand. That would certainly have suited my expression.

Of course the whole of the Committee was out with the other noble judges watching justice done, so I had to wait outside the anteroom for them to come back, tapping my toe with anxiety and impatience. I had a good view: one of the tall windows outside the Committee chamber directly overlooked the Piazzetta. I found myself a warm spot near a brazier and stood among a crowd of well-dressed tax collectors, shrinking my wet cloak in the heat.

From the great Campanile the bell began to toll. It was the second chime of the *marangona*, the bell that marks the Venetian working day. It should have signalled the time for workmen to take their morning break, but they had better entertainment today. Today the bell rang for a man's death.

The last stroke of the bell was drowned in a great fierce roar of glee from the crowd. They were bringing the criminal out. He was a grizzled middle-aged man, dressed just in his shirt. He looked as any middle-aged man would look dressed in just a shirt on a wet winter day, huddled and shivering and cheese-coloured with cold.

Some priest shrived him and then they pushed him up towards the stake. He began to fight and cry out, and the crowd shouted encouragement to the men dragging him up the ladder. He struggled like a mad dog, but they got him up there and tied his hands around the stake. His shirt was stained with the shit of fear.

The wood was wet and hard to light. When they finally persuaded it to catch it smoked. The crowd were disappointed, because smoke kills a man fast and you can't see anything. The criminal screamed and started to cough,

at which point I turned away and said to one of the tax collectors beside me, 'What did he do?'

'Sodomy on a minor,' said the tax collector, a big jolly-looking man with a splendid paunch under his worsted and fur robe. He flipped self-consciously at the heavy gold and enamel chain he wore around his neck, showing off his substance. 'His page. The boy complained to his older brother. The investigators found physical evidence when they examined the page, and he,' he waved a fat beringed hand towards the stake, now invisible behind a pall of smoke, 'confessed.'

'Under torture?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Serve him right,' I said, turned my back on the window and folded my arms.

Presently the show was over and people began to trickle back into the building. My fat friend went off to massage another set of tax assessments. The secretary of the Committee opened the anteroom door, saw me and summoned me with a polite jerk of his narrow chin.

'You're not popular,' he said as we crossed the anteroom. I shed my wet cloak and slung it over a chest in a corner. My boots were beyond help. 'I hope you have a good excuse for what happened at Monemvasia.'

He didn't deserve a reply. He opened the door to the Committee chamber and announced me. I walked in, swept off my hat and bowed elegantly low. I like to look urbane.

'Marcello D'Estari.' The Chairman of the Security Committee sat in the centre of a long narrow table, dressed from head to foot in scarlet. He answered only to the Doge, Giovanni Dandolo, which made him a very powerful man. Plenty of people expected him to be elected to succeed Dandolo in due course, which would be nothing but good for Venice. There were four other men flanking him, two on either side, which was more than usual. I had seen two of them on the Committee before: two were new. They were

dressed in patrician's robes, with the wide red capes over their shoulders which were the badge of their office. The secretary sat at the end, dressed in rusty black and hunched among his mountains of papers. I stood, my hands hitched in my belt, uncomfortably aware that the heat from the great fireplace was making my wet tunic steam.

The Chairman said, 'Ser D'Estari, this is Signor Pirano dela Mota, a new member of the Committee. And this is Signor Vallerio Dolfin, co-opted for this meeting alone.'

I bowed again. Both of the new members looked at me with blank faces. They were middle-aged noblemen, the same age and rank as my father, with the level, haughty expressions of men accustomed to influence. Dela Mota I did not know, but ten years ago I had known quite a lot about Signor Dolfin. He had not changed much: a handsome, sturdily built man with heavy features and thick grey curls under his white linen coif and his expensive beaver-fur hat. He had seen me before, but he did not remember. It made me uncomfortable to have him sitting there. Co-opted for one meeting? Why?

'My lord,' the Chairman said to dela Mota, 'I believe that you had some questions for Ser D'Estari.'

Was this the inquisition on Monemvasia? Dela Mota hitched forward the folds of his heavy scarlet robe and folded his hands on the table in front of him. He was wearing velvet gloves embroidered with gold thread and lined with ermine. A great diamond glittered on his thumb, and I could see by the bumps on the gloves' fingers that he had rings beneath them as well. He looked like the sort of man who would know every coin by name.

Dela Mota fixed me with a cold beady eye and I looked back at him perhaps a little more coolly than was entirely courteous. He said in a thin voice, 'I am new to this Committee and I wish to form my own judgement on the men who serve it.'

That in itself made me bristle. I serve the Republic of Venice, not the men of the Committee, and I have followed my own conscience rather than my orders before now. But dela Mota did not seem to notice that I stiffened. He steepled his fingers together and continued, 'You are a bastard son of Signor Domenico Bono, yes?'

I wonder if all illegitimate sons are as sensitive as me. Whenever I am asked that question in that typical superior, drawling tone I want to grab the questioner by the lapels and shake him and yell into his face, 'Listen, you ignorant idiot, my father loved my mother. He would have married her if he could!'

'That is correct, my lord,' I said, setting my jaw.

Dela Mota consulted the secretary in an undertone, then pressed on. 'Your mother was Elisaveta, called L'Estari, licensed prostitute.'

She was a courtesan. She was his mistress. She lived in the house he gave her. She bore him his first son. From the time he set up her household until the day she died she never lay with another man.

I kept myself very still. 'Yes, my lord.'

His eyebrows were dark and hairy, like two caterpillars crawling across his face above his thin nose. He lifted them now. 'Most noble bastards use their father's name. To advance them in life, shall we say? Your father is one of the Forty, it would do you good to make your relationship to him public. Why do you call yourself D'Estari?'

That was none of his business. 'My father and mother decided it, my lord, and I have seen no reason to change it.'

'Humph.' He sat for a moment, considering his next question. I looked into his face with hatred, wondering how many bastards he had littered about Venice. Had his maids and his girl-slaves laid newborn infants before the church door? The next time I was at liberty I would amuse myself by digging out some real filth about Signor dela Mota and

splattering it all around the Rialto market. The streets would buzz with it as far as Spinalunga.

‘Is your father aware of the work you undertake for the Committee?’

‘Only in part, my lord. My lord the Doge approached me personally after his election to ask me if I would act as an agent of the Republic.’

Dela Mota looked startled and turned to the Chairman for confirmation. After a moment he said, ‘Why did the Doge know of you?’

‘I operated as a freelance in the Aegean for some time, working against the pirates,’ I said. ‘In one operation I saved a Dandolo ship with a very valuable cargo. This was before my lord was elected Doge. He thanked me personally and employed me sometimes after that to protect his convoys.’

He nodded, pursing his lips. ‘That is all,’ he said, sitting back and nodding to the Chairman. There was a rustle and the Committee members looked at each other. Then the secretary prompted, ‘My lords: Monemvasia.’

The next series of questions was as bad as I had expected. It really hadn’t been my fault, but it is hard to explain field work to a quintet of noble merchants sitting in a comfortable chamber. I did not come off smelling of roses, but in the end they seemed more or less satisfied that there was nothing I could have done differently.

At last the Chairman said, ‘Well, Marcello.’ My Christian name now. Thank God for that. I bowed. ‘We did not recall you simply to put you on the griddle over Monemvasia.’ He looked at a paper before him. ‘I understand that you speak both Arabic and Sicilian dialect.’

For a moment I didn’t reply. My stomach turned over. I could feel the blood draining out of my face, and I put my hand to my forehead to conceal it. The Chairman was watching me with his eyebrows raised, and I swallowed hard and managed an answer. ‘Yes, my lord, that is correct.’

'How do you come to speak Sicilian?' demanded dela Mota.

You fat-arsed lapdog, read my papers if you want to know. Why make me tell you? I would have liked to grind his face in the dirt. I said evenly, 'I was a slave in Sicily for nearly two years, my lord.'

'A slave?' he sounded astonished. 'A Venetian citizen a slave?'

'My ship was wrecked,' I said. 'The survivors were picked up by Barbary pirates and they sold us. I was a slave worker in a sugar factory for six seasons.'

'How did you escape?' he asked, his caterpillar brows arching skywards.

Vicarious excitement was what he was after. He was not going to get it from me. I appealed to the Chairman. 'Is this relevant, my lord?'

Dela Mota looked offended, but the Chairman nodded. 'Signor dela Mota,' he said, 'the secretary will explain to you later, if you wish. Ser D'Estari's full history is known to us. Marcello,' he said, 'you are aware that the Emperor Michael of Byzantium is intriguing against Charles of Anjou, King of Sicily.'

'Yes, my lord. It is his only hope to prevent the invasion.'

'We have reason to believe that the Emperor is fomenting conspiracy in Sicily itself. The King of Aragon is involved. We know that Byzantine gold is entering Sicily. We are seriously concerned. If there should be a rebellion in Sicily, it might prejudice the joint Venetian and Angevin attack on the Empire. We have tried to warn King Charles, directly and through our connections at the Angevin court, but he will not listen to us. Immediate action is required.'

'In Sicily,' I said, with a sinking heart. I had hoped that I would never have to set foot on that accursed island again. Could I refuse the assignment? I wanted to.

'In Sicily. King Charles's invasion fleet is assembling off Messina and his land forces are in Messina and across the

straits in Naples. The fleet will sail in the spring to rendezvous with ours off Corfu. Signor Vallerio Dolfin,' Dolfin inclined his head to me and I acknowledged him with a small bow, 'has been appointed the Republic's naval advisor to the Angevin invasion force. He will be going to Sicily within the week. We wish you to go with him and work as our agent to uncover the network by which Byzantine gold is distributed. If you can discover the agents of conspiracy and remove them, so much the better.' He leant forward, holding my eyes. 'Without the Angevins we cannot make a direct attack on Byzantium. With them, we stand a chance of recovering all our possessions in the Aegean. Do you understand, Marcello?'

Of course I understood. The ambition of Venice is to control Mediterranean trade. To do that we need to control the ports, and as much of the hinterland as counts. 'Yes, my lord,' I said. 'But just because Byzantine gold is making its way into Sicily, it doesn't mean that Charles's expedition is doomed.'

'No. And that is why we are sending you to make sure that wherever that gold is going, it does us no harm. The Angevin fleet must sail in the spring, Marcello. It must sail.' He nodded to the secretary, who came to me with a thick bundle of papers. Agents' reports, copy bills of lading, notes of ship movements, lists of names.

'Signor Dolfin will be resident in Messina,' said the Chairman. 'It will be difficult for him to find reason to leave that city. We will rely on you for intelligence from the rest of the island. You will report to Signor Dolfin unofficially, by whatever method you think fit. Officially the Republic will not know of your presence in Sicily.'

Typical. Diplomatic immunity for the noble lord in charge, and nothing for the poor hapless agent. I said, 'I understand, my lord.'

'It will be better, my lord, if you deal with Ser D'Estari in private,' said the Chairman, turning to Vallerio Dolfin. He

jumped and bowed. I would have said that he was nervous. 'The fewer people know of any detail, the better. He is experienced in these matters. He will explain to you what you need to do.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Dolfin, bowing again. I swear he was pale.

'My lord,' I said, and the Committee swung as one man to look at me. 'My lord, the Byzantine Emperor's treasury is deep, and it takes a decoy to catch a duck. Will funds be available to me?'

There was a rustle from the Committee members. Dela Mota looked as though he had smelt a fart. The Chairman frowned, then said, 'If it is necessary.'

'It will be necessary,' I assured him. 'I will need access to gold: Byzantine gold, for preference.'

'You might abscond with it and vanish!' exclaimed dela Mota.

'My lord Chairman knows me better,' I said, looking into the Chairman's eyes. He held my gaze for a moment, then nodded. Dela Mota subsided, muttering, and to conceal my pleasure at having put him down I turned to Signor Dolfin and said, 'I will wait on you at Ca' Dolfin later in the day, my lord, if it please you.'

He nodded slowly, still looking apprehensive. The Chairman consulted the secretary, then said, 'Thank you, Marcello. That will be all.'

Outside the chamber in the corridor over the Piazzetta the air still smelt of smoke and burning flesh. I stood leaning against a wall, my arms wrapped tight around myself, trying not to shiver.

Sicily. And with Fiammetta's father.

THREE

WHEN I MENTION Lucia, people start making assumptions. Perhaps I am married and the various girls I visit around the Mediterranean are simply victims of a philandering and faithless nature. Wrong. I'm not married, at least. Or perhaps I like my creature comforts and so I keep a woman at home, a slave perhaps, to cook and clean and warm my bed. Wrong again. I could afford a girl-slave, even a pretty one: but this is not the explanation either. Venice is the only port that I don't have a girl in.

Lucia must be well into her sixties. I have begun to notice that she looks older each time I return from another long absence. She stoops almost double now, and the lines multiply on her face like spiders' webs in an unswept room. I suppose she will die in the foreseeable future and one day when I come back the house will be cold and dark. I don't like to think about it. When my mother was a courtesan Lucia was her tiring-maid, and a good one. When my father set my mother up as his mistress Lucia became her housemaid. She brought me into the world. I still sleep in the bed where I was born in the house that was my mother's, and Lucia is still my housemaid. She knows everything about me, and she is unshockable.

When I came into the house she was mending a tear in a shirt sleeve, a memento of the crossbow bolt at Monemvasia. It's amazing how many of my clothes she has had to stitch, one way and another. She frowned when she saw my face.

'Marco.' My mother used to call me Marco, and Lucia still does. Nobody else does. 'Bad news?'

I shook my head and said, 'Yes,' giving out mixed messages, as usual. She raised her eyebrows, but said nothing else. She never says much. A tiring-woman either chatters non-stop, or she learns silence. 'I have to go to Sicily.'

'Why?'

Good question. I couldn't answer it at once. I sat down on the stone bench in the wall and looked up at the painted beams of the ceiling. Then I said, 'Fiammetta's father is being sent there.' I would have told someone else that I was a patriot and that it sounded like an important mission, or that I didn't want to be afraid of a place just because it had bad memories, or that I thought some of the Byzantine gold might stick to my pocket. Any of these would have been partly true. But I always told Lucia the real truth.

She looked at me in silence. Her face was pale and pouchy under her thick black veil. After a moment she said, 'I'll get you something to eat,' set down her mending on the little carved table by her stool and went slowly towards the kitchen.

Seeing Vallerio Dolfin had thrown me into a quicksand of memory. Every time I struggled to escape from it it sucked me in deeper. I looked at the stairs with out-of-focus eyes and saw my mother.

'Mama, I'm sleepy.' A nine-year-old whine. 'I want to go to bed.'

She leans over me, dark-haired, dark-eyed, with skin whiter than the clouds. She is thirty-five years old and the most beautiful woman in the world. 'You'll have to sleep down here, caro mio. Your father is coming.'

I know already. I know because of her intricately braided hair, the dangling earrings of Byzantine filigree, the subtle paint on her eyelids, the embroidered shift of cotton so gossamer fine that her body gleams through it like the foam

on surf. She always looks more beautiful when my father comes. I hate it that she loves him more than me.

The sound of a boat tying up outside. My mother kisses me briefly and rumples my hair then runs to the door and opens it herself, as if she cannot afford a maid. My father stands there, flinging back the hood of his furred velvet cloak. He glances over his shoulder as he comes in, then he embraces my mother and she clings to him. He kisses her and his big ringed hand touches her breast and she makes a little smothered sound as if he has hurt her. I huddle further back into the window seat. He doesn't see me. He stoops and catches her into his arms and lifts her, moving towards the stairs to the upper chamber as if steered by wires. He murmurs to her, 'Elisaveta, Elisaveta, mia bella, carissima,' and she sighs and stretches up her parting lips.

They vanish upwards into the shadows, trailing the sounds of their pleasure like gauzy scarves. I wrap my arms around my knees and stare at the staircase, suppressing the tears that scald my eyes.

I hate him.

I presented myself at Ca' Dolfin about halfway through the afternoon and was admitted at once. The steward must have been expecting me, for he showed me straight upstairs, above the counting-house and storerooms to the *piano nobile*, the great first-floor reception chamber. I looked around curiously as we ascended. It is odd to have been on the top floor of a house and never have seen the main staircase.

I knew the Dolfin family was wealthy, one of Venice's premier clans, and the house proved it. It was spacious and well appointed, floored with marble and terracotta and polished wood, hung with rich tapestries. The balusters of the stairs were gilded and the wooden roof-beams were painted in brilliant colours. I have more subdued taste, and I preferred my father's house.