

DEATH IN THE SERENE REPUBLIC

Venice, 1721

IT WAS THE EVE OF the Feast of the Ascension, a night filled with masked balls. Truth be told, in Venice one needed only a small excuse to hold a ball. And one needed even less excuse to wear a mask. Masks were almost as common a fashion accessory as gloves or hats.

There had even been a time, not long before, when women of society were forbidden to venture out in public without masks, an attempt by the Senate to discourage the wearing of showy jewelry. What would be the point of extravagant displays, the Senate reasoned, if no one could identify the wearer? The unexpected result of the law had been to allow high-class women to travel anonymously throughout the city, doing whatever pleased them.

Shortly after two on this early morning of revelry, Cesare Contini, heir to a long line of merchants, prepared to leave the Golden Ball. He stood on the portico of the Ca' d'Oro, the house of gold, facing the Grand Canal, and thanked his host, Count Franchetti, for the wonderful party.

"Your wife is not leaving with you?" asked the count, a bit confused.

"Too much wine gives me a headache," Cesare explained, massaging his temples. "And I don't wish to spoil Lucrezia's fun. Ah, here's Mario." The merchant stepped into a sumptuously painted gondola bearing his family crest. Half a league

away, at another palazzo along the Canal, Cesare's mistress had already left her ball of the evening and was walking purposefully to a point of rendezvous.

At about the same time, Lucrezia, Cesare's wife, was on the opposite side of the Ca' d'Oro. As her husband exited the party onto a canal, she was exiting onto a courtyard. Another guest, a man in a gold mask, rushed to stop her. Both revealed their faces and Lucrezia found herself staring up at Tommaso Romano.

"At the midnight dinner, when you let me touch your hand, you knew it was me."

"Yes," replied Lucrezia, trying to remain calm.

"I haven't seen you since your wedding." Repressed anger tinged the ex-suitor's voice. Lucrezia stepped back and, in her anxiety, twisted her papier-maché volto, accidentally breaking the silver mask in two.

"Here," Tommaso said. In a gallant gesture, he took her mask and replaced it with his own, identical except for the layer of gold paint.

She thanked her old sweetheart, donned the gold mask, and wrapped the hood of her crimson cape over her long, black curls. "We all make wrong choices in life, Tommaso. I am sorry."

Some passers-by later recalled seeing Lucrezia walking along Strada Nova. Or was it Riva delle Carboni? This was a night of parties and it was hard to recall. A handful of revelers did have a very clear memory of her pacing agitatedly by the Ponte Santa Marina, an elegant footbridge that spanned a spot where three canals joined. When the tide was flowing out to sea, as it was then, the currents could be treacherous.

It was nearly three in the morning, and the tired, drunken few looked on curiously as she walked to the middle of the bridge, removed her mask and hood, and, with a cry of despair, threw herself into the swirling black water.

In a city so accustomed to theatrics, it took several seconds

for the terrible reality to sink in. The women stepped forward to the stone railing, scanning this rio, then that one, at the same time urging their men to do something, for heaven's sake. One man tried, doffing his cloak and diving into the cold darkness. But to no avail.

For two days, the body was not recovered. Doge Giovanni, chief magistrate of the Serene Republic, took a personal interest. Lucrezia had been born into one of Venice's richest families. Cesare's family wasn't far beneath hers, and if his fortune had dwindled.... Well, times change. None of the city's merchants were prospering as they had before the discovery of the New World.

Giorgio Presto was summoned for a private audience. The aide's usual function was to investigate the anonymous accusations of wrongdoing that citizens were free to place in the mouth of the stone box in the Doge's Palace. But on this day, the Doge had a different assignment for him.

"You must recover Lucrezia Contini's body," the city's ruler said. "This accident has devastated her family." The Doge emphasized the word *accident*. Suicides were barred from Christian burial. "Also, without a corpse, it will be harder for Signore Contini to settle his wife's estate. The body should have floated and surfaced by now. See what you can do."

The aide went to work, sending men with nets to drag all the canals below the bridge of Santa Marina. Then he went to pay an official visit of condolence.

Ca' Contini was an old *fondaco*, a combination palazzo and warehouse left over from the 13th century, before the merchant kings had grown too grand to live above the store. Only a few of the *fondacos* remained, and their canal-level loading docks had been transformed into indoor boat slips for the family gondolas. As Giorgio rowed his *puppavino* up to the Contini mansion, he saw that the warehouse doors were closed.

Cesare Contini met him at the ornamental entrance and apologized for making him dock at the outside wharf. "Each

year, we close off the indoor slips for a few days. Repair work. You can't imagine the rot in these ancient houses."

Giorgio explained his mission and Cesare thanked him for the Doge's sympathy. "Lucrezia should have come directly home. I went home myself and was worried when the hours passed and she didn't return."

Giorgio followed Cesare into the grand salon and was surprised to see two others there. The woman he recognized, Maria Garda was a young widow of questionable character. After her husband's death, a note had been slipped into the stone box, accusing Maria of his murder. Giorgio personally questioned her in a cell across the Bridge of Sighs from the Doge's Palace. Crossing the fateful bridge was by itself an ordeal. But Maria had withstood the hours of questioning with admirable will—or innocence. Maria had been Cesare's mistress even before his marriage to Lucrezia. Such things were common knowledge.

The salon's other occupant introduced himself. Tomasso Romano wore the plumed uniform of a palace guard. An ambitious, passionate man, Giorgio judged. "I'm glad the righteous magistrate has seen fit to investigate this tragedy," the guard said, throwing a scornful glance at Cesare. "Whatever happened on that terrible night, they drove her to it."

Giorgio realized that he had just walked in on a confrontation. He recalled vaguely now that Tomasso had once been an ardent suitor of the dead woman. Giorgio stood erect, tri-cornered hat in hand, and offered the condolences of the Doge and the Council of Ten.

Early the next morning, a vendor was maneuvering his *peata* through a little-used section of Rio del Pombo. He had made this same journey late the night before, his barge laden with fruits to sell at the campo markets. The vessel was considerably lighter now, but he was paying just as much attention to the shoals and banks. At least he thought so—until he hit something.

A golden shimmer sparkled from the shallow water. It

looked like a face. No, not a face. A mask. The handsome young vendor used an oar to try to pull the body to the surface. He saw the sash of a crimson cape tangled firmly around a submerged bar, holding the bloated corpse to its position, bobbing just below the surface.

An hour later, Giorgio was with the canal men as they dragged Lucrezia Contini from the water. The mask the vendor had seen was still clutched in the dead woman's hand.

"I have fulfilled the Doge's request," Giorgio thought. "The unfortunate woman can be buried. And yet..." He stared down at the body. "And yet something is wrong."

(1) Who, if anyone, was responsible for Lucrezia's death? (2) What were the circumstances behind her death? (3) What was the motive for the murder or suicide?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 133.

To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 109.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON VENICE

TOWARD THE END of the Roman Empire, when the barbarians came down from the north, the people of eastern Italy sought refuge along the shallow sea, building a village on wooden posts pounded into the marshy seabed. The official date of founding this village, now called Venice, was 421.

This isolated fishing village evolved into a republic, with a senate and a chief magistrate (Doge) elected by the property-owning males. The citizens dubbed their city the Most Serene Republic. It remained a sleepy trading outpost until the time of the Christian crusades. Suddenly, the attention of Europe was focused east—to the Holy Lands and the rich trading routes to India and beyond. The Venetians had become expert sailors and no other city was in as strategic a location. In the space of a few decades, Venice grew into one of the richest cities in the world.

The city's slow decline began in the late 1400s. By then, the Turks had taken control over much of the eastern trading routes. And to the west, the riches of the Americas were being exploited by Spain, Portugal, France, and England, countries much better situated to take advantage of this New World.

For centuries, Venice remained a romantic party town, living off its past. It now exists almost entirely on tourism. The population is half what it was just fifty years ago. And the sheltering sea has added one more problem: too much water. Even a newly built series of dykes may not be enough to save Venice from sinking.