



## *La Serenissima*

Caterina  
The Summer of 1578

*La Serenissima* seems to slip more readily from its piles today. Sinking, sliding, headfirst into the watery grave below. From every side comes the foul odour, so pungent the acidity burns the eyes. The plumes of smoke from the mountains of burning bodies hang in the sky, like mocking clouds. Groans and sighs echo across the canals. The abandoned boats, bourn by the tides, seem skippered by the dead.

The peal of church bells once heralded the dawn over the lagoon. This morning, the only bells that ring hang from the ankles of the *pizzicamorti*. Skulking through the streets, his hook-nosed mask and tarred cloak betray his profession: the gravedigger.

I watch as the *pizzicamorti* breaks down the door of the ramshackle house across the canal. Three days had passed without Pietro giving account of himself and his family. Their deaths were suspected. The *pizzicamorti* drags Pietro and his once blossoming wife, ready for the birthing suite, from the house and throws them onto the heap, bound for the fires. The churchyards had long ago overflowed, even after the graves were done away with in favour of shallow trenches. Pietro's daughter, golden curls matted to her forehead, sits silently in the street, sucking her thumb. Her other fingers are black. The rot has set in. The thwack of the *pizzicamorti* hammering planks across Pietro's front door, somehow trying to trap the plague inside the house, diverts my attention from the girl. I say a silent prayer for her, knowing she will be gone by this time tomorrow.

It is the people I cannot stand to see. The people are pitiable to behold. They sicken by the thousands daily, and die unattended, most without care or love. They die in the street. They die in the mud and the filth and the seeping refuse, amongst the rotting vegetables, rancid fat and the vermin. In the end, the sickness does not know, or care, of the difference between man and vermin.

I remember. I remember a time, not that long ago, when Venice was a jewel in the glittering crown of the sea. She was a city bursting with wealth and arrogance and pride. She was full to the brim with merchants and traders from all corners of the world, turning her streets and canals into a carnival of colours. The Ottomons and Persians with their heads bound in great lengths of cloth, the silk merchants from China swathed in ruby red robes, and the Indian spice traders with their sweetly-scented cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, they all came to wonder at her beauty.

Not that long ago, I had watched boats so laden with produce for the market, it seemed as though they must sink. Peasants mingling, exchanging tales from the mainland while the devout hurried to early-morning mass and the labourers trudged by, readying themselves for another day. I would have smiled, watching the wealthy men and women enjoying the sunshine under the watchful eyes of the pimps, prostitutes and pick-pockets, eagerly scouting their day's prey.

I would have watched the builders, toiling to make the dreams of the wealthiest families tangible, as they all vied to build the grandest *palazzo*. The builders, chest-deep in the murky marshes, driving piles into the sludge to support the weight of Venice's wealth, on display for all to see along the *Canal Grande*. Pink and yellow and green *palazzos* all along the *Canal Grande*, with their key-shaped windows, like eyes into the world of the wealthy. All wishing, hoping, praying that their *palazzo* will live up to the majesty of the *Palazzo Ducale*.



It is there that I met him. At the *Palazzo Ducale*.

Summoned by a member of the *Maggior Consiglio*, I had arrived at the *Porta della Carta* when the sun was high in the sky. Nearby, the public scribes scratched furiously at their parchments, recording the whims of the powerful for posterity. They stopped only to thwart the beads of perspiration rolling down their faces, otherwise destined to smudge their scribbles.

As I waited for one of the scribes to find my name on a long list of petitioners, I gazed upward. Flanked by the four cardinal virtues, the statue of Justice loomed above the gateway to the *palazzo*. Her sword seemed to hang, ready to lop the head from the shoulders of any petitioner set on the path evil. Eager to hasten my safe passage past her sword, I dipped my head. Gazing adoringly at the scribe with doe-eyes through my dewy lashes, I whispered to him, 'Come, you must have heard my name before. I have been summoned by the *Maggior Consiglio* and am likely to be late, should you not hurry. Let me pass. We can become better acquainted on my departure'.

Like all men, when proffered time in my company, his response was instant. He led me through to the inner courtyard and told me to wait at the foot of the Giant's Staircase. Guarded by colossal statues of Mars and Neptune, I knew that the staircase led to the inner sanctum of the *palazzo*, to *La Scarlett Camera*.

It was in *La Scarlett Camera* that I first saw him.

He was there, warming his hands by the fireplace. Carvings of cornucopia, grape vines and angels adorned the fireplace. I remember thinking that he could have been one of the angels, with the determined set of his jaw, the mop of dark, curly hair and heavy, solemn brows that were offset by his mischievous grin. As I stood in the doorway, waiting for my introduction, his gaze lit upon mine. A pair of eyes the colour of the aquamarine lagoon on a bright summer's morn twinkled at me across the room. That mischievous grin played on his lips. In a bound he was across the room, my hand in his. 'I have been waiting for you. I want to hear your thoughts on Tintoretto, Titian and Dante. I want to discuss Portugal's new trade route. I want you to tell me how to defeat the Ottoman Turks.' All this he demanded, while still grinning like a school boy.

'Sebastiano, I am just a woman. Here to please the eye, not to delight the mind. These are matters for men in the war room, not women in the salon.' Not knowing the sincerity with which he spoke on our first meeting, I replied in the way I ought, the way in which I had been taught.

'Ah ... but you are not *just* a woman are you? You are accustomed to keeping company with the most powerful of men. Although you may not have been invited to give your opinion before, I wager that you have been privy to some of the most important conversations in Venice ... nay, Italy.'

Sebastiano was right, of course. Although, it would be some months before I would admit as much to him. Never before had a man asked, let alone demanded, to know my opinion on matters of import. Moreover, Sebastiano had made his demand in front of the whole court; in front of the *Maggior Consiglio*, the courtiers, the wealthy merchants and traders, the ladies and their attendants. Powerful men would listen to me, humour me, in the privacy of their chamber, for fear I might withdraw my other, womanly talents. They did not treat me as an equal.



It was my mother that had fostered my womanly talents. I was trained by my mother, as tradition dictates, and educated, with my father's permission, alongside my brothers. For that, I am eternally grateful. My mother showed me how to use my womanly assets to my advantage while my father educated me in the world of men. I learnt Latin and Greek. I know all there is to know about literature, politics, astronomy, mythology, history, religion, mathematics, law, finance, music and poetry. I am different. I am special. That is why I am the most expensive, sought-after *cortigiana onesta* in Venice.

That is why I am accustomed to keeping company with the most powerful of men.

I had thought that this particular powerful man was different to all the rest. Sebastiano's respect for me, for my opinion, right from our very first meeting, set him apart from all the rest. He treated me as his equal. Each night we would walk, hand in hand, along the canals watching the sun sink in the sky, turning the water from green to pink to black. And all the while we debated politics and dissected great works of poetry. He taught me the subtleties of chess. I showed him how to pluck a harp. He would serenade me. I would cook for him. Our card games would take hours, bickering over bets and suits, but always settled with a kiss. We would lie in bed for hours while he confided in me about matters of state, about petitioners come to curry favour, about the plots and ploys of the courtiers. We would pour over maps while he decided on trade routes, on alliances, on war tactics. Always, he would ask, and listen, for my advice. For the first time in my life, it was not my womanly talents that interested this man. It was me. We were equal. He loved me.

Until the plague arrived.

The accusations started when the plague arrived. It started with whispers, with furtive sideways glances and halted conversations that seemed to amplify in parallel to the rising death toll. Now, the courtiers leer at me in the hallways and refuse to meet my eye when I pass by. Women who I had come to think of as friends, no longer call on me. Even the servants refuse to enter my chambers alone. They come in pairs, as if to protect one another. I know what they are all saying, what they are all thinking, what they have been telling Sebastiano.

Then yesterday, I realised, he had come to believe it too.

We set off early in the morning, before the city was awake, on my usual pilgrimage. The morning was clear. The groans and sighs of the dying were muffled by the songbirds scudding across the azure sky. For once, the plumes of smoke had melted away. The scent of the freshly baked bread I carried in my arms pulled me back to my childhood, sitting on my mother's warm hearth waiting to breakfast with my family.

I was pulled from my reverie by a tug on my skirts. A grimy face, with eyes that betrayed a sorrow that should have been beyond the child's meagre years, peaked out from between the folds. I leant down and gently placed a small loaf of bread in her outstretched hand. Like a startled deer, she darted off through the gates, gripping her prize with all her might. We had arrived at the orphanage. I insisted on visiting the orphanage every morning, with food for the children and support for the women who had dedicated what was left of their time on this earth, to care for *La Serenissima's* forgotten. The plague had dashed families against the rocks, leaving children



floating, drowning, alone. The orphanage plucked the children from the waves and gave them hope.

Sebastiano had insisted on coming with me yesterday. He had never come with me before. His advisors would not allow it. It was not safe, they said. He would be sick before day's end, they told him. Yesterday, he refused to listen to their grumblings. He told them that if I, a mere woman, could visit every morning, and look the picture of health, then surely he, a virile man, could handle such an outing. His advisors knew better than to argue.

I saw how Sebastiano looked at me as I wandered through the orphanage, as I cradled the sick in my arms and cooed soft words of love to the dying. As I helped the women plait their hair and arrange the supplies for the day. As I made the children's beds and handed out the loaves of bread. He was shocked. He was dumbfounded. He could not understand. He could not believe. All colour drained from his face. That boyish grin vanished. In all these weeks, with all the time I had spent here, how had the sickness not clung to me, as it had to everyone around me? Why was I not rotting in the ground with all the rest?

He could not speak to me as we waded through the streets, slick with mud, back to his chambers. I kept up a steady stream of chatter, desperately asking him question after question, but he seemed unable to hear me. His face was a mask of pain. He barely noticed the urchins' blackened fingers clawing at his coat tails, desperate for a coin. He did not flinch when a bucket of slop landed at his feet. He reached out instinctively, as if to take my hand, but then hesitated and let his arm fall by his side. He could not meet my eye. I knew then that he believed it too. He believed what they had all been saying.

I must be a witch.

I know he has to do what he thinks is right. I know that his mind is set. I know he is going to turn me over to the Inquisition.

I cannot let that happen. I will not let that happen. I turn sadly from the window, stiff from perching on the window-ledge all morning, and cross the room. Sebastiano lays so peaceful, sprawled across the bed, with limbs tangled in the sheets. That mop of curly, dark hair in disarray and that mischievous smile still playing on his lips. I stroke his face. One solitary tear slips, unheeded down my cheek and lands on his chest. I kiss the damp splotch where it has landed. He stirs but does not wake.

In the end, it is easy. I feel the life slip from his body. I return the pillow to its rightful place on the bed and bend to kiss him goodbye, to kiss *La Serenissima* goodbye. In the distance, I can hear the ring of the *pizzicamorti's* bells, coming for Sebastiano, coming for *La Serenissima*, coming for me.