

# A Venetian Affair

## excerpt Chapter One

Early in the evening Andrea caught up with Giustiniana at the theater. She was radiant in her brocaded evening cape, and the anxious way she was looking around for him made her seem lovelier than ever. She smiled as she saw him, and they exchanged a few signals from a safe distance, apparently without raising Mrs. Anna's suspicions. After the play, Andrea followed mother and daughter to the Ridotto, keeping close to the walls of the narrow streets and casting nervous glances ahead. In the gambling halls, among the late-night crowd of masked men and women hovering around the faro tables, he had a much harder time avoiding Mrs. Anna as she flitted in and out of the shadows in the candlelit rooms. He was terrified she might suddenly come upon him and make a horrible scene. Unnerved by all the difficulties, he finally gave up and went home without having had his cherished moment alone with Giustiniana.

That night he hardly slept, shifting restlessly in his bed, wondering if he had abandoned the Ridotto too abruptly and not made it sufficiently clear to Giustiniana why he was leaving the scene. The next morning he rose early and wrote to her at once:

My beloved,

I am very anxious to know whether your mother noticed anything last night—any act of imprudence on my part—and if you yourself were satisfied or had reason to be cross. Everything is so uncertain. At the theater things didn't go badly, but at the Ridotto—I don't know how it all ended at the Ridotto. As long as I was in your mother's range I tried to conceal myself—as you probably saw. And rest assured that when I did not show myself to you it was because Mrs. Anna was looking in my direction. Once you left the rooms I no longer saw our tyrant and imagined we had lost her for good—your own gestures seemed to suggest as much. . . . But I asked around and was told she was still there. . . . I waited a while to see for myself, and sure enough there she was again. So I resolved to put myself out of her sight.

Mrs. Anna clearly hoped that, thanks to her intervention, the passion so perilously ignited in the house of Consul Smith would subside before any irreparable damage was done to her daughter. But she had wrenched them apart just as they were falling deeply in love. Their need to be together was stronger than any obstacle she could put in their way; the thrill of their forbidden relationship only drew them closer. As Andrea pointed out to Giustiniana, her mother's relentless watch and the atmosphere of general disapproval she helped to foster around them made their desire to be together "even more obstinate." In fact, there had been no separation to speak of in the wake of Mrs. Anna's pronouncement. The two lovers continued to look for each other ever more frantically, playing a highly charged game of hide-and-seek in the streets of Venice, at the theater, among the crowd at the Ridotto.

It is easy to see Mrs. Anna in the role of the insensitive and overly censorious mother—a tyrant, as the two lovers called her. But she had good reason to be firm. She was a woman of experience who had worked hard to gain respectability, and she well understood the intricate workings of Venetian society, in which the interests of the ruling families were supreme. She was also very much aware of Andrea's special place in that society—and what a formidable opponent he was in her struggle to protect her daughter.

The Memmos were among the founding fathers of Venice in the eighth century—historians have even traced the lineage of Andrea's family as far back as the gens Memmia of Roman times. There was a Memmo doge as early as the year 979, and over the next eight centuries the family contributed a steady flow of statesmen and high-ranking public servants to the Republic. By Andrea's day they were still very influential in Venetian politics—an elite within the elite, at a time when many other patrician families living in the city had become politically irrelevant.\* But they were not among the richest families; by the 1750s, their income had dwindled to about 6,000 ducats a year, and they would have needed at least double that amount to face comfortably the expenditures required of a family of such elevated rank (the wealthiest families had incomes ten times as large). They earned barely enough from their estates on the mainland to live with the necessary decorum at Ca' Memmo, the large family palazzo at the western end of the Grand Canal.

Andrea's father, Pietro Memmo, was a gentle, virtuous man long weakened by ill health. His mother, Lucia Pisani, came from a wealthy family that had given the Republic its greatest and most popular admiral—the fierce Vettor Pisani, who had saved Venice from the Genoese in the fourteenth century. Pietro was always a rather remote figure—he and Andrea could find little to say to each other—and Lucia was not especially warm with her children either; her

stiff manner was fairly common among the more old-fashioned patrician ladies of that time. Nevertheless, she was by far the more forceful of the two parents, and Andrea felt closer to her than he did to his father. The one person in the family he truly adored was Marina, his older sister by six years: a sensitive, kindhearted young woman whom he could always confide in. Andrea had two brothers: Bernardo, who was one year younger than him, and Lorenzo, who was four years younger. The three boys, being fairly close in age, spent much of their time together when they were growing up. There was also a younger sister, Contarina.

The family patriarch was Andrea Memmo, Andrea's venerable uncle, known for his courage and strength of character; he had been imprisoned and tortured by the Turks while he was ambassador to Constantinople in 1713. The senior Andrea served the Republic with great distinction and ended his political career as procuratore di San Marco, the second most prestigious position in government after the supreme office of doge. He went on to become a respected elder statesman whom his peers considered "possibly the greatest expert in Venetian matters." He died at the age of eighty-six in 1754—the same year Andrea and Giustiniana's secret love affair began.

Andrea's uncle ruled over the family with a steady hand for decades, overseeing everything from political alliances to business decisions, from household expenses to the education of the younger Memmos. During his long stewardship, Ca' Memmo was known for its strong attachment to tradition. But it was also considered a progressive house where writers, artists, and composers were always welcome. The new ideas from Paris, especially the political writings of Montesquieu (Venetians had a predilection for anything involved with the machinery of government), were discussed spiritedly at the dinner table.\* Their friend Goldoni, the great playwright, was a frequent lunch guest. So was the German composer Johann Adolph Hasse, the "divine Saxon" who had married the diva Faustina Bordoni and ran the music conservatory at the Incurabili, one of the hospices where young orphans were trained as musicians and singers.

Very early on, Andrea senior had chosen his favorite nephew and namesake as his successor. Over the years he instilled in him a sense of duty toward family and nation that would remain with him all his life. And he prepared him for a career in the service of "our wise Venetian Republic, which has seen the largest and wealthiest kingdoms fall over the past ten centuries and more, and yet has managed to stand firm amid everyone else's misfortune."

Andrea received his first formal education from Eugenio Mecenati, a Carmelite monk who worked as preceptor in several patrician families. But his mind wasn't really turned on until he met Carlo Lodoli, a fiery and charismatic Franciscan monk. During the 1740s Lodoli established himself as Venice's controversial resident philosopher. He was a brilliant scholar and teacher, equally at ease talking to his students about astronomy, philosophy, or economics. Lodoli's great passion was architecture, a field in which he applied the principles of utilitarianism to develop his own visionary theories about function and form. Wrapped in his coarse habit, the monk had a rugged, unkempt look about him that could be quite intimidating: "The red spots on his face, his wild hair, his unshorn beard, and those eyes like burning coals—he very nearly scared off the weaker spirits," Andrea wrote many years later. Lodoli's disciples came from the more enlightened families in Venice. He never wrote books but kept students under his spell through the force of his personality and the probing power of his Socratic "conversations." His mission, as he saw it, was to open the mind of young patricians. The Venetian authorities were wary of the strong influence the monk had on his disciples. But Lodoli was not interested in subverting the established political order, as his conservative critics suggested: he wanted to improve it—by improving the men who would soon be called upon to serve the Republic.

Andrea remained devoted to Lodoli all his life, but the moral rigor of the Franciscan, his ascetic lifestyle, could be a little hard going. It is easy to see why Andrea's sensual side was somewhat starved in his company, and why he spent more and more of his time in the splendid house-museum of Consul Smith on the Grand Canal, just a short walk down the street from Ca' Memmo. He spent hours studying the vast collection of paintings and sculptures the consul had assembled over the previous thirty years and happily buried himself in the library—an exceptional treasure trove of classics and moderns in beautifully bound volumes.

Smith had arrived in Venice in the early years of the century, when the city still attracted a good number of foreign merchants and businessmen. He had gone to work for the firm of his fellow Englishman Thomas Williams and had been successful enough to take over the company when Williams retired a few years later and returned to England. Smith went on to build a considerable fortune trading in the East, buying goods from Venetian merchants and selling them on the British market. In 1717 he married Catherine Tofts, a popular singer who had made a name for herself in the London theaters before coming to Venice. Wealthy and well connected, Catherine was certainly the major drawing card of the Smith ménage in the early years of their marriage. But over time she gradually withdrew from

society, perhaps never recovering from the loss of their son, John, who died in 1727 at the age of six.

As his business flourished, Smith purchased Palazzo Balbi, which he had rented ever since his arrival in Venice, and commissioned the architect Antonio Visentini, a friend and protégé, to renovate the façade. After some plotting within the English community in Venice and a great deal of pleading with the government in London, he eventually obtained the consular title in 1740. Much to his chagrin, he never became the British Resident (ambassador).

Consul Smith would probably have long faded into history had he not branched out into art and become one of the greatest dealers of his time. He made a habit of visiting artists, many of whom had studios a short walk away from his home. Smith had a good eye, and he delighted in friendly haggling. His collection included beautiful allegorical paintings from Sebastiano Ricci and Giovan Battista Tiepolo, grand vistas by Francesco Guardi, intimate scenes of Venetian life by Pietro Longhi, and several exquisite portraits by Rosalba Carriera. But his special admiration was reserved for Canaletto's clean and detailed views of the city, and over the years he developed a close professional relationship with the great Venetian vedutista.

Smith combined the eye of an art lover with the mind of a merchant. He realized he was living at the heart of an extraordinary artistic flowering and was in a unique position to turn his patronage into a profitable business. He commissioned works from his favorite artists and sold them to wealthy English aristocrats just as the fashion of collecting art was spreading. (He was so successful in marketing his beloved Canaletto that the artist eventually moved to London to paint views of the Thames for his growing clientèle.) In the process, Smith built up his own collection, enriching it with important paintings by old masters. Works by Bellini, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, and Rubens adorned the walls of his palazzo. Books, perhaps even more than paintings, were his true passion. He purchased valuable editions of the great classics as well as original manuscripts and drawings, and he participated directly in the publishing boom that was taking place in Venice. Smith invested in Giovan Battista Pasquali's printing shop and bookstore, and together they published the works of Locke, Montesquieu, Helvetius, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot and his fellow Encyclopédistes (the first volumes of the revolutionary *Encyclopédie* appeared in 1751). Pasquali's shop soon became a favorite gathering place for the growing Venetian book crowd. "After having enjoyed the fresh air and shared the pleasures of Saint Mark's Square," wrote the French traveler Pierre Jean Grosley, "we would go to Pasquali's shop or to some other bookseller. These shops serve as the usual meeting point for foreigners and noblemen. Conversations are often seasoned with that Venetian salt which borrows a great deal from Greek atticism and French gaiety without being either."

Smith's drawing room was, in a way, an extension of Pasquali's shop in more elegant surroundings. It was the center of the small English community (and it somehow never lost its touch of English quaintness). But more important, it was a place where artists, intellectuals, and Venetian patricians could congregate in an atmosphere of enlightened conviviality. Carlo Goldoni dedicated one of his plays—*Il filosofo inglese*—to Smith. In his flattering introduction, he wrote: "All those who enter your house find the most perfect union of all the sciences and all the arts. You are not a lover who merely gazes with admiration but a true connoisseur who is keen to share the meaning and beauty of the art around him. Your good taste, your perfect knowledge have inspired you to choose the most beautiful things, and the courage of your generous spirit has moved you to purchase them." Andrea spent many happy days at Palazzo Balbi. It was in the consul's library that he learned his Vitruvius, studied Palladian drawings, and pored over the latest volume of the *Encyclopédie* (he got into the habit of copying out long passages to better absorb the spirit of French Enlightenment). Smith, his only child having died so many years earlier, developed a genuine affection for Andrea and as he grew older came to depend on him as a confidant and assistant. By 1750 he was already in his seventies. He had lost his sure touch in business transactions, and his weakened finances would only get worse. Having no heir and less and less money, he conjured up the deal of his lifetime—an ambitious plan to sell his huge art collection and his library to the British Crown. He enlisted Andrea to help him catalogue all his paintings and books.

Under the influence of Goldoni, Andrea also developed a strong interest in the theater. During the season, which ran from October through May, he went to the theater practically every night. He threw himself with enthusiasm into the raucous debate that was raging between conservative and progressive critics. Though Goldoni was twenty years older than Andrea, he enjoyed the young man's company, regarding him not just as a promising member of the ruling class but also as a possible ally in his crusade in favor of plays that were closer to the everyday life of Venetians. In 1750 he dedicated his *Momolo cortesan* to Andrea, telling him he hoped that together they would "rid the stage of the obscene and ill-conceived plays" produced by his conservative rivals. With Goldoni's encouragement, Andrea started to work in earnest on the idea of opening a new theater entirely dedicated to French plays, from Molière's classics to the light comedies of Marivaux. The goal, he said, was "to improve our own theater . . . and lift the common spirit in an honest way."

While Andrea waited patiently for his turn to serve as a junior official in the Venetian government, his days were filled with his work for Smith, his new theater project, and the increasing load of family responsibilities being thrust upon his shoulders by his aging uncle. There was still plenty of time for evening strolls and gallantries in Campo Santo Stefano and Piazza San Marco, late-night discussions in the coffeehouses and *malvasie* (wine shops that specialized in the sale of malmsey) and even the occasional trip to the Ridotto—though Andrea was never much of a gambler and went there mostly to meet friends and survey the scene.

Among his new friends was Giacomo Casanova, who returned to Venice in 1752 after his first trip to Paris. He and the three Memmo brothers were often seen together at one of the popular *malvasie*, where they drank until late, played cards, and boisterously panned the latest play by the Abbé Pietro Chiari, Goldoni's chief conservative rival. Andrea's mother was not happy about her sons' friendship with Casanova. She saw him as a dangerous atheist with low morals who was bound to corrupt her children, and she alerted the authorities through her political connections. It turned out that the *Inquisitori di Stato*—the secretive three-member committee that oversaw internal security—viewed Casanova much in the same light and were already compiling a hefty dossier on him. Indeed, the band of merry revelers was being watched by the few shopworn informers still on the government payroll, one of whom confidently explained in his report that what bound Casanova and his friends was the fact that “they are philosophers of the same ilk . . . Epicureans all.”

In spite of his busy life and his many distractions, Andrea's sense of duty to the Republic was so ingrained in his mind that he saw his passion for architecture, his love of the theater, and his knowledge of painting and drawing not as ends unto themselves but as additional endowments that he would put to practical use during his public service. It did not occur to him to seek a different road from the one his uncle Andrea had set for him. He clearly considered marriage from the same perspective. Before meeting Giustiniana, Andrea had enjoyed a number of affairs. He loved the company of women and from a young age was much in demand among his female friends—he was also quite a dancer, which helped. But he had had no great romance or lasting relationship. He knew and accepted the fact that he was bound to marry a young woman from his own social class and that the families would seal the marriage after long negotiations that would have little to do with the feelings of the bride and the groom. Everything young men like Andrea had been taught at home “underscored the irrationality of choices made solely on the basis of sentimental feelings.”

Andrea's world—rich and varied and challenging but also largely predictable—was suddenly shaken up when Giustiniana stepped into it in late 1753. She came from another sphere entirely, having just returned with her mother and siblings from London, where they had traveled to collect the family inheritance after the death of Sir Richard, her beloved father. During her yearlong absence, she had blossomed into a lively and very attractive young woman. The Wynnes had a two-year, renewable residency permit; they were not Venetian citizens and therefore, like all other foreigners, had to obtain a special authorization to stay in the city. They settled in a rented house in the neighborhood of Sant' Aponal and at first led a quiet life, mostly within the small English community.

Sir Richard Wynne had left his native Lincolnshire distraught after the death of his first wife, Susanna. He journeyed across Europe and arrived in Venice in 1735 “to dissipate his affliction for the loss of his lady,” as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, famed and restless English traveler disapprovingly put it during one of her many stays in Venice. He was soon introduced “by his gondolier” to Anna Gazzini, a striking twenty-two-year-old Venetian with a less-than-immaculate past. Anna had actually been born on Lefkos, a Greek island in the Ionian Sea, where her father, Filippo Gazzini, had once settled to trade, but the family returned to Venice when she was still a little girl.

Anna became Sir Richard's lover soon after they met. Two years later, she gave birth to a baby girl who was baptized Giustiniana Francesca Antonia Wynne on January 26, 1737, in the Church of San Marcuola. Sir Richard doted on his daughter. He did not return to England, married Anna in 1739, and legalized Giustiniana's status six years later. (The legalization papers refer to Anna's father as “Ser Filippo Gazzini, nobleman from Lefkos,” but this belated claim to nobility had a dubious ring to it even back then.) Anna gave birth to two more daughters: Mary Elizabeth in 1741 and Teresa Susanna in 1742, known as Bettina and Tonnina. Their first son, Richard, was born in 1744, followed by William in 1745. A fourth daughter, Anna Amelia, was born in 1748 and died two years later.

Mrs. Anna must not have been much fun to be around. Perhaps to atone for sins of her youth, she became a fierce Catholic who dragged her children to church and pestered her Anglican husband endlessly to convert. She was a strict disciplinarian, bent on giving as traditional an education as possible to Giustiniana and her younger

brothers and sisters: music, dance, French, and little else. Sir Richard was quite content to leave the upbringing of the children to his wife and retreat to his well-stocked library. As his gout worsened, he withdrew from family life even more. Many years later, Giustiniana remembered him sitting with a book in his favorite armchair “the six months of the year he didn’t spend in bed.”

Despite his poor physical condition, Sir Richard developed a close bond with Giustiniana. They shared a love of literature, and he gave her the keys to his library. From a young age she read eagerly but with no guidance or method, moving randomly from travel books to La Fontaine’s fables to heavy-going tomes such as Paolo Sarpi’s history of the Council of Trent—a book the Inquisition had banned for its sympathetic view of the Reformation. Giustiniana was caught reading it secretly. From the little we know of Sir Richard, he must have chuckled at his daughter’s temerity. Anna, on the other hand, had a fit and threatened to lock Giustiniana up in a convent.

Sir Richard died in 1751, and the following year Mrs. Anna dragged her five children to London to claim their inheritance. It was a long, tedious journey. Many years later, Giustiniana would remember only the dirty hotels, the bad food, and “all those churches [in Germany] so heavy with ornaments.” But she loved London—“the parks, the noise in the streets, the pretty hats . . . and the general air of opulence”—and she would have gladly stayed on. “I had learned English well enough, was rather good at handling a fork, and was expecting to put my new skills to good use.” Mrs. Anna, however, was there for the money. When she finally got her hands on some of it, thanks to the intercession of the children’s guardian, Robert d’Arcy, Earl of Holderness, a former British Resident in Venice, the family packed up once more and headed home—this time taking the more pleasant route, via Paris.

Giustiniana was not yet sixteen when she arrived in Paris with her mother and her brothers and sisters. But she did not go unnoticed during her brief stay. Casanova met her in the house of Alvise Mocenigo, the Venetian ambassador. Forty years later, he still had a vivid memory of that first encounter. “Her character,” he wrote in his memoirs, “was already delineated to perfection in her beautiful face.” Giustiniana loved Parisian life—“the theater, the elegance of men, the rouge on women’s cheeks”—but Mrs. Anna was anxious to get back to Venice, so they made their way home, taking with them a French governess, Toinon, who was much loved for her skill in combing the girls’ hair.

The return of the Wynne sisters—“le inglesine di Sant’Aponal,” as they quickly became known—generated a certain amount of excitement among the young men in town. Sure enough, Casanova—who had also returned to Venice in the meantime—came knocking at their door shortly after they had settled in, claiming that he had fallen in love with Giustiniana. Mrs. Anna, aware of his reputation and keen to keep her daughter out of trouble, turned him firmly away. (In his *History of My Life*, Casanova claimed that Giustiniana then wrote him a charming letter “which made it possible for me to bear the affront calmly.”) Mrs. Anna had every intention of keeping her daughters on a very short leash, and Giustiniana, who was just beginning to enjoy the pleasures of society, discovered, to her dismay, that their life in Venice “had been reduced to a small circle indeed.” Much of their time was spent at home, “where we went on about Paris and London.” It was all rather glum.

The house of Consul Smith, one of the few Mrs. Anna allowed her daughters to frequent, was their link to the world. The consul, who had known Sir Richard well, was one of the most prominent foreign residents in town. He had seen the Wynne children grow up and had promised his old friend he would watch over his family and help Mrs. Anna sort out her finances. Palazzo Balbi became a second home to the young Wynnes, a place removed from their dreary house at Sant’Aponal, filled with beautiful objects, where the conversation had a cosmopolitan quality that reminded them of Paris and London. The consul, for his part, looked upon the Wynne children with avuncular affection. He was especially pleased with Giustiniana, who always brought a breath of fresh air to his house. “Mister Smith shared with me his love for his paintings, his antiquities, his library in order to enrich my passion for learning,” she later reminisced. One suspects he also rather enjoyed parading through his magnificent rooms with such a lovely young girl on his arm.

During one of her visits to Palazzo Balbi the consul introduced Giustiniana to his dashing young assistant. As soon as Mrs. Anna heard about her daughter’s infatuation, she became very anxious. Since the death of Sir Richard, she had lived in the fear that the respectability she had so stubbornly built up over the years might abate, leaving her and her family exposed to insidious and materially damaging forms of social discrimination. Her fear was well founded. Even in the relatively tolerant atmosphere of eighteenth-century Venice, many people still made a point of remembering that Lady Wynne was in fact the daughter of a “Greek” merchant.

And there were lingering rumors about the amorous adventures of her youth: some even murmured that she had given birth to a child before taking up with *il vedovo inglese*—the English widower. Now she was a widow herself, living in a rented house with five children and with past sins to hide, and it is easy to see why she felt her position in society was so precarious—all the more so since she was in Venice at the pleasure of the authorities. Her residency permit might not be renewed or might even be revoked. So she had to act judiciously to maintain the standing Sir Richard had bequeathed to her.

However detestable her unyielding attitude must have seemed to the two lovers, it was certainly justified in the eyes of the English community. Consul Smith was fond of both Andrea and Giustiniana, but he was a practical man. When Andrea confided in him he sympathized with the lovers to a point. Nonetheless, he was very much on Mrs. Anna's side. The few Venetian families with whom the Wynnes socialized also supported her—especially the powerful Morosinis, with whom the Memmos had a long-running political feud and whom Andrea detested. But her chief ally, as opposed as they were in character and inclination, was Andrea's mother. Lucia saw, perhaps more clearly than the rest of the Memmos, the material disadvantages that a union with Giustiniana would bring to an old house which needed to reinvigorate its weak finances. And she feared the political damage the Memmos would suffer if her eldest and most promising son ever betrayed the family and crossed the inquisitors by marrying a woman beneath his rank.

The difference between the two mothers was that Lucia simply wanted to make sure Andrea did not get it into his head to marry Giustiniana. If in the meantime he dallied with her, as young men often did before settling down, it was no great worry to her and would not damage his future prospects. Mrs. Anna, on the other hand, was fighting a daily battle to prevent any contact between the lovers that might taint the family's reputation and jeopardize her daughter's chances of a respectable marriage.

Mrs. Anna was losing the battle. Andrea's courtship was assiduous, visible to everyone, and highly compromising. He saw Giustiniana every day at the *Listone* in Piazza San Marco, where Venetians gathered for their evening stroll, and often later on as well, at one of the theaters. He frequently moored his gondola to the narrow dock below the Wynnes' house and called on Giustiniana in full view of the family. In the winter of 1754 Mrs. Anna finally confronted him. She caused a terrible scene, declaring Andrea *persona non grata* in their house and making it clear she never wanted to see them together again. All communication was forbidden: letters, messages, the merest glance. It had to finish, she yelled—and sent him on his way.

News of Mrs. Anna's dramatic stand traveled quickly around town. Andrea referred to the scene as his *cacciata funesta*—his fateful banishment, and the starting point of all their misery.

Mrs. Anna was a fierce watchdog, always on the alert and obsessively suspicious. She kept a close eye on her eldest daughter and did not let her go out without a chaperon—usually herself. Her spies were planted wherever the lovers might seek to escape her gaze, both within the English set and among Venetian families, and she kept her ears constantly pricked for gossip about the lovers. Venice was a small world. Everyone knew who was losing his fortune at the *Ridotto* on a particular night and who was having an affair with whom. Andrea and Giustiniana were aware of the risk they were taking in defying Mrs. Anna's ban; they had to be extremely careful about whom they spoke to and what they said. At a deeper level, they knew the future offered little promise of an end to their difficulties. But it was too soon, and they were too young, to worry about the future. For all the trouble their love had already caused, only one thing mattered to them in the winter and spring of that year: exploiting every opportunity to be together.

From the Hardcover edition.

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