

The Assassin of Verona

Benet Brandreth

ZAFFRE



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by

ZAFFRE PUBLISHING
80-81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.zaffrebooks.co.uk

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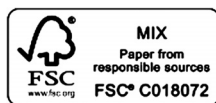
A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78576-155-3

also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Zaffre Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk



To my mother:

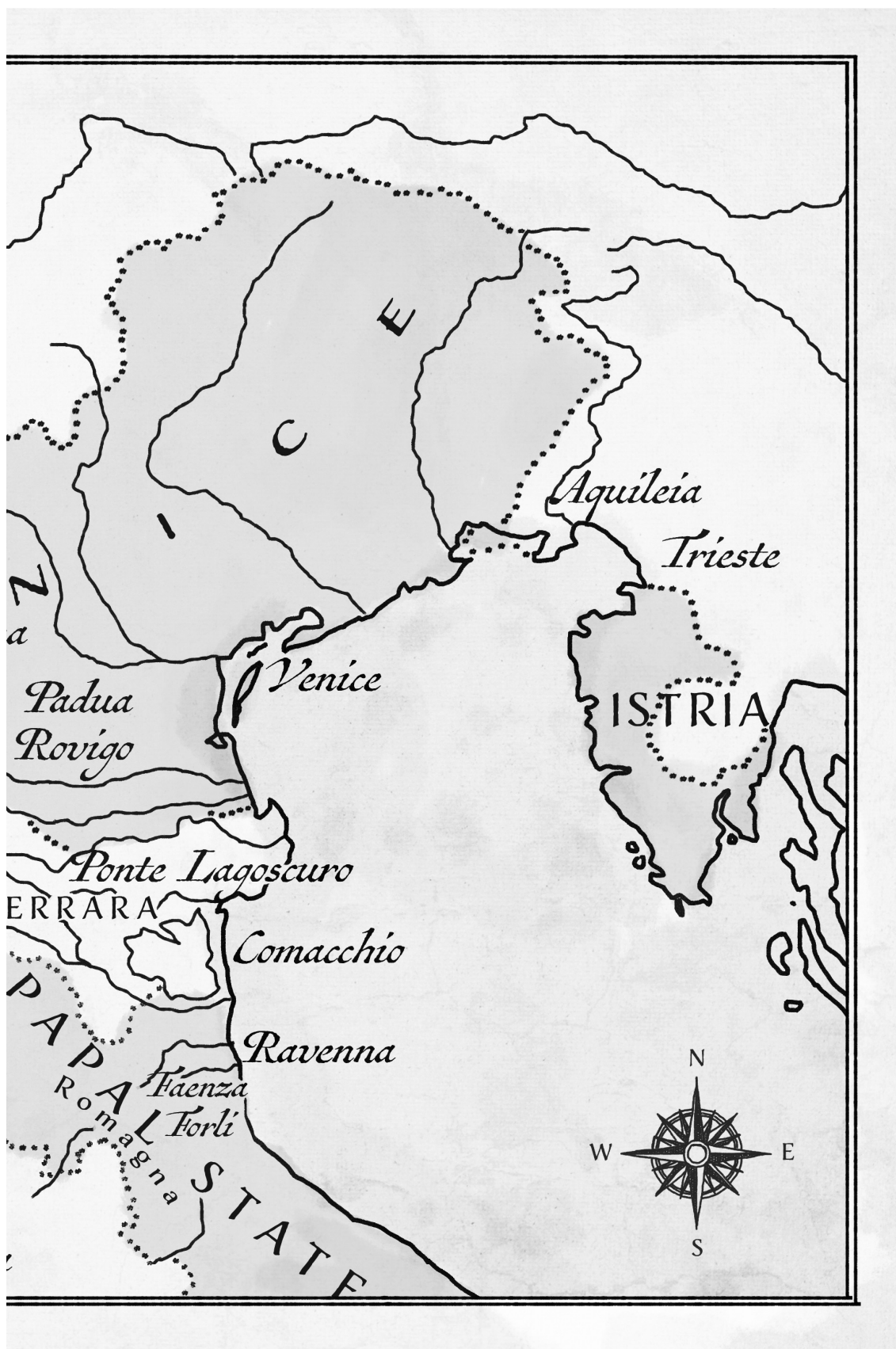
*If you had been the wife of Hercules,
Six of his labours you'd have done, and saved
Your husband so much sweat.*

To my father:

*Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.*

MAP OF VENETO





Dramatis Personae

Rome

Pope Sixtus V The former Cardinal Montalto, a man of strong will and stronger action, a pope of whom it is said that he has more spies than other Italian princes have soldiers.

Father John Thornhill An English priest.

Cardinal Decio Azzolini Papal Secretary.

Arrigo A soldier in the army of the Republic of St Peter.

Venice

William Shakespeare Player disguised as William Fallow, steward to the English Ambassador to Venice, Sir Henry Carr.

Nicholas Oldcastle Player disguised as Sir Henry Carr, English Ambassador to Venice.

John Hemminges Player and friend to the former.

Isabella Lisarro Poet, courtesan and wonder of an age.

Marco Venier Nobleman of Venice, wealthy patron of the arts provided they be profitable.

Cosimo Tiepolo Younger brother to Francesco Tiepolo – an attainted traitor to the Republic of Venice and an exile.

Monsignor Cesare Costa Nuncio to the Holy See.

Isabella Andreini Player and mistress of the most famous troupe in all of Italy, I Gelosi.



Verona

Duke Leonardo Barbaro A proud and intemperate nobleman,
ruler of a portion of the Veneto.

Aemilia Barbaro His daughter.

Valentine Vicentino A distant cousin to the Duke.

Rodrigo The Duke's steward.

Dionisio Servant of the Duke's household.

Outlaws

Orlando Leader of the vagabond fellowship.

Luca An outlaw and brother to Tommaso.

Zago Cook to the outlaws.

Petro Priest and minister to the outlaws.

Ludovico An outlaw.

Tommaso An outlaw and brother to Luca.

Jacopo An outlaw.



Scenes

Prologue	Rome, August 1585
Act One	Venice and Verona, November 1585 to February 1586
Act Two	Verona and woods in the Veneto, February to March 1586
Act Three	Verona and woods in the Veneto, March 1586
Act Four	Verona and woods in the Veneto, March 1586
Act Five	Woods in the Veneto, March 1586
Epilogue	Woods in the Veneto, March 1586

Prologue

Rome, August 1585

The small group gathered before the wooden statue of the Christ. It was a plain and simple thing, no great master's work. Yet it was the reason for their journey. The statue stood at the centre of a private chapel on an estate two leagues outside Rome. At the centre of the group stood the Pope with his Secretary beside him. Behind them stood four men in the robes of various orders and with faces whose skin bore the colouring of several nations. The four men, each of whom had been loyal to the Pope even when he had been merely the Cardinal Montalto, had been called to the estate for conference, each making a journey far longer and more arduous than that of the Pope and his Secretary. None understood why they were to meet here, so far from the comforts of the Vatican Palace, until the Pope began to speak – and then the value of this secluded meeting place and its seeming other purpose in the statue became clear.

The little group of priests stood alone in the chapel save for the owner of the estate, who stood nearby shifting from foot to foot. The man's delight at the great honour of the Pope's visit had been transformed. Pride had turned to concern and concern to fear. He did not understand all that passed between the Pope and his confederates, but he understood enough to know that this was discourse on matters political, not wise or safe for one such as him to hear, and it frightened him that none seemed to care that he did hear it.

Outside, beyond earshot, held back by the Pontifical Guard, were pilgrims. They had come in their hundreds this past month, paying the owner of the estate well for food, for water, for beds. They came to view the miraculous statue that wept tears of blood. The statue that the Pope now stood gazing upon. The pilgrims had left rich offerings to be washed by those tears, the stain of whose path could be seen on the statue's roughly carved face, which now was dry. Their excitement to have arrived at the same time as His Holiness was great. Would the Pope witness the miracle himself?

The Pope turned back from contemplation of the statue to the four men behind him.

‘You understand the importance that I place on your mission?’ he asked. All four men bowed their heads.

‘Have you any questions?’

‘Does your Holiness have a description of the English agents?’ asked the tall, gaunt priest who stood a little apart from the others.

Cardinal Azzolini answered for his master.

‘Little more than that they are English, Father Thornhill. Of the Embassy there are two: an old man, tall and round, the Ambassador, and a younger one, who plays at poet and lover in Venice. These two may be innocents who serve to distract us from the true agents of the English crown. There is a third that we know of also, of middle years, a true killer if rumour be believed. Three at least, yet all must be taken. How many English can there be in Venice?’

‘Do not concern yourself overmuch with the Ambassador and his men, Father Thornhill,’ said the Pope to the tall priest. The Pope turned to the pink-faced man that stood next to the priest. ‘It will be your task, Monsignor Costa, to deal with the English Embassy while it remains in Venice. Your roles,’ he gestured to the other three, ‘are in the north. You, Father Thornhill, to Verona, you, Father Montanio, to Padua, and you, Father Fiorucci, to Mantua. There is a disease in the north that must be cut out before it rots the healthy body. Root out heresy where you find it, purge it with fire. I must have quiet if France and Spain are not to be diverted from their path to fruitless battle in the northern duchies. If in your mission you find any messenger that may have evaded Monsignor Costa in Venice, well then, I trust that you will attend to it with—’

His speech was interrupted by a shout from the pilgrims at the door. It was echoed by a sigh that went up from the four men facing the Pope. Cardinal Azzolini placed a hand upon the Pope’s arm to draw his gaze back round to the statue, from whose eyes there now dripped bloody tears. The owner of the chapel and the statue fell to his knees and began praying loudly for the mercy of Christ the Redeemer. The Pope stared at the statue for several moments until he realised that only he and the gaunt priest, Father Thornhill, were not kneeling. Thornhill’s pale eyes

were not fixed on the statue as the others' were but on the praying figure of the owner of the chapel.

The Pope turned and called to his guards' commander at the chapel's door. The man ran to him.

'Your sword,' the Pope commanded.

'Your Holiness?' his captain asked, eyes flicking to the statue, unsure what the Pope sought.

'Give me your sword, Captain,' the Pope demanded again, his irritation clear.

The captain hurried to pull the long sword from its scabbard and placed it in the Pope's hand. The Pope now strode to the statue and crossed himself.

'As Christ, I worship you,' he proclaimed loudly. Then, lifting the sword above his head with both hands, 'But as wood, I break you.'

Cardinal Azzolini watched in horror as the Pope brought the sword crashing down on the miraculous statue, which split asunder with a loud snap. A hush entered the chapel followed by a moan of disbelief from the crowd pushing at the door. Then the Pope held out the sword to his captain, shaking it to grab the attention of the stunned man. Just as the captain reached out to take it, the Pope snatched it back to move the wooden pieces with the blade's tip.

'You see?'

The captain bent forward. The head of the statue was hollow and within it sat a sponge soaked in blood. Wrapped round the sponge was a thread that, drawn, pulled tight about the sponge. The trail of the thread led to the rear of the nave. The captain strode to the back and dashed aside a curtain that hung there to reveal a cowering woman, one end of the thread grasped in her hand. She dropped it as if it had become hot and fell to her knees imploring forgiveness and pointing at her husband, the owner of the estate.

The Pope gestured to the owner of the estate with the sword he still held.

'Seize them. Take them to Piazza di Ponte. Take his head as a warning to others not to abuse Christ's name by preying on the credulous. Her flog.'

Ignoring the couple's cries for lenience the Pope turned back to the four men.

'The names of our agents must not reach England. The heretic Queen Elizabeth must be deposed. Without England there is no Philip, without Philip there is no Jerusalem. Our plans turn on our men in England. They must not be exposed. You understand? Cast mercy from you. Do whatever must be done to keep them secret.'

Act One

*Venice and Verona,
November 1585 to February 1586*

And will this brothers' wager frankly play

Venice

It came, as so many deaths do, as the result of a wager.

William took Isabella's hand and kissed it, receiving only a warning look in return. He strode to the balcony and stripped off his doublet, to the general applause of the gathered guests. William bowed in acknowledgement; Isabella rolled her eyes. Then William turned to Cosimo Tiepolo who stood similarly shorn of all clothing save that which modesty required.

'You see, Tiepolo, we English have nothing to hide.'

Cosimo Tiepolo gestured to his own state of undress in answer. William put on a face of great sadness.

'Oh, you are merely exposed, Tiepolo.'

The young man curled his lip at William's barb. Let the Englishman battle with words, Cosimo thought, I have weapons that leave more lasting wounds. He pointed out across the balcony to the city of Venice. Below, the Canal Grande curved away, a glittering road of silver in the light of the full moon. Beyond, the buildings were dark shadows, studied here and there with gold from the light of lamps at the shrines, the *ancone*, that were placed throughout the city. In the silence of the night it seemed as if those at the Ca' Venier were the only people awake. Even the Canal Grande was still, no breeze lifted its waters, no gondola travelled upon it.

'To the statue of the Hunchback at Rialto and back,' declared Cosimo.

'And the loser quits Venice this very night?'

'I swear it.'

'As do I.'

Cosimo nodded, smiled, then leapt to the parapet and dived. William waited only long enough to cast a smile in Isabella's direction before he too bounded to the balcony's edge and sprang high, turning his body in the air to strike like an arrow into the water below.

Isabella strode to the balcony and looked out to the canal. She picked out the two heads cleaving their way through the waters of the Canal

Grande, already some distance from the Ca' Venier. Headstrong youth, she thought, her fingers fretfully dancing on the balcony rail. Had William so quickly forgotten the enemies they had made, the dangers that surrounded them, the need to guard themselves and venture forth only in company, among friends? Marco Venier approached and placed his hand over her own where it clutched at the parapet. After a moment she took it back.

'Foolish man,' she said.

'Perhaps he is, but I think your Will will win his wager,' Marco answered, 'and better such a wager than the duel that was threatened.'

'When I spoke of fools, I was not speaking of that headstrong boy but of you, Marco. Why did you invite Cosimo Tiepolo to the feast knowing that William would be here too?'

'I am a neutral, Isabella. I oppose none, at least not openly. Cosimo's brother Francesco may have been attainted traitor but his family's power is not to be dismissed, nor its scions ignored.'

'Be that so, still, where lay the wisdom in bringing together two avowed enemies?'

Marco gestured to his guests, now pulled together in knots of heads, all bent in delighted gossip.

'Little wisdom,' said Marco, 'but much entertainment.'

Isabella looked at those gathered at the feast. She could see more than one that shook hands and joined their wagers to that of William Shakespeare and Cosimo Tiepolo. She looked back at their host, Marco Venier, her friend, whose thin lips now carried a wicked smile. Almighty God, let not William lose, thought Isabella, or I will be alone among these crocodiles.

Why, your dolphin is not lustier

For a moment, when he struck the water and its cold clutched at his sides, William regretted the fretful mood that had provoked him to the wager. Then his head pierced the water's surface, he saw his quarry ahead and he felt the thrill of the chase upon him. All thought of consequence was banished, for a young man longs to feel his strength and William felt his now. His arms cleaving the water of the canal like an oar's blade, he struck out and, steadily, he gained on Cosimo Tiepolo.

The moon shone fair on the water of the Canal Grande, showing William a path of slippery onyx. Even had it not, in the four months that had passed since William's arrival in Venice, he had learned the city's ways well enough to know his route now. The Canal Grande curved away in a great arch ahead and beyond that bend, out of sight, lay the statue of the Hunchback by the Campo Erberia, which he or Cosimo must reach and return from. The straightest path lay along the Canal Grande. Cosimo took that course. William knew another route, crooked but shorter. He might cut across the bend of the Canal Grande by turning down one of the canals that stemmed from it and gain minutes on his opponent.

It was just such a boastful claim to knowledge of the city that had been the prompt to argument at the Ca' Venier. Though William was not a year older than when he had left his home in Stratford, the months that had passed since then had been rich in experience. The company of his friends Hemminges and Oldcastle and their players' lessons in London had become the dangers and disasters of the fateful embassy to Venice. How had fortune twisted and turned then, the Ambassador's murder compelling Oldcastle and him to disguise themselves as the English Ambassador, Sir Henry Carr, and his steward, William Fallow. A disguise that they still wore and whose comforts they had grown accustomed to but not before it had exposed them to the hate of the Pope's assassin, Giovanni Prospero, snatching Hemminges from them, and then giving him back just in time to save Vittoria Accoramboni, the Duchess of Bracciano, from Prospero's murderous game. William himself marvelled at the difference between

his greener days and those he mastered now. Above all else, the love of Isabella Lisarro, a woman he considered matchless, fierce in intellect, against whom he could find no worthy comparison, had given him confidence in his own abilities and judgement. So, when the discourse had turned to questions of England's newly begun war with Spain, William had ventured his opinion.

'It would serve Venice well to aid our English cause in the Netherlands. Philip of Spain is no friend of Venice. It is his ships that have cut the vein of Venice's trade with the East. Yet by England's defiance he is made distract, turns his thoughts northwards and away from those places most dear to the Republic's interest.'

'How can Venice align itself with England? England is a heretic state, her Queen excommunicate, her navy little more than pirates.'

It was a thin-lipped man that spoke, his voice carrying an accent from outside Venice, though from where William could not say. His dress severe in cut and colour, he was a poor guest at a celebration such as this. William and Isabella had noted him earlier precisely for how he stood out, dour amongst the joy. The more so since he kept company with far gaudier fellows whose rich dress marked them as members of the *Compagnia della Calza*, a society of the wealthy youth of Venice. This man was a crow among peacocks, his voice as devoid of emotion as his clothing of colour.

William frowned. 'Venice trades with the Turk, with the Jews, with the Russians. Venice is commerce and commerce knows no religion. Besides, Venice loves a victor and England will be victorious.'

A new voice spoke in answer. 'Your Earl of Leicester will be crushed within the month, William Fallow. England is a child, at war with men full grown.'

William had not expected to see Cosimo Tiepolo at Marco Venier's feast. Still less to see him so proud, dressed in the flame-coloured stockings of the *Compagnia della Calza*.

'England is an insect, a beetle, next to the power of Spain. It will be crushed like one.'

William caught Isabella's cautioning look but paid it no heed. He could see well enough that Cosimo sought to provoke him but, so, he had succeeded.

‘There is a difference between a grub and a butterfly. So England was a grub but is now grown. You think Spain’s eye will pass over Venice without pause because it did not aid England? Think rather that Spain will take each, one by one, that fought alone when together they might have held out till the end of time. I say again, an alliance is as much in Venice’s interest as England’s.’

‘You claim to speak in Venice’s interest?’ Cosimo’s voice rose.

William cut across him. ‘I do. It is not the first time I have spoken in Venice’s interest when those born to that interest have counselled against.’

Green-blue Murano glass shattered across the mosaic floor of the Ca’ Venier’s great room. The sound brought silence to the guests gathered in the Palazzo as all turned to look first at the angry young man who had hurled it and then at the young man whose shrewd eyes briefly gazed on the broken remnants at his feet before turning to look again on the hurler.

‘That was my grandfather’s,’ observed Marco Venier.

‘Your arrogance is unbearable.’ Cosimo Tiepolo spoke from a face hot with choler. He felt the eyes of the silent guests on him and fought for composure.

‘You claim to know this city but you are a cuckoo, no more,’ said Cosimo.

‘I am not born of the city, true, but I know its mood better than you do, peacock. And if a cuckoo, then all I have done is push out a basilisk egg that, left untouched, would have devoured the whole brood.’

A low, delighted muttering was running round the crowded guests for William’s words were well aimed. All understood that this William Fallow, the English Ambassador’s man, spoke of Cosimo’s brother Francesco Tiepolo, so recently declared traitor by the Council of Ten of the Signoria of Venice and fled the city under sentence of death. If rumour were to be believed – and when was it not – this William was responsible for the charges. His jibe at the brother seemingly confirming it. Only William and Isabella among the guests knew that the charge of treachery against Francesco Tiepolo was false. Or that William had arranged it to see justice done against Francesco for what William thought a far greater, far fouler crime against Isabella that would otherwise have gone unpunished.

‘All you will know of this city is two strides’ length of it and one stone,’ answered Cosimo, stepping forward, his hand moving to the dagger at his belt.

Marco Venier stepped in front of him. ‘Gentlemen, calm.’

The thin-lipped Crow spoke up: ‘Perhaps these two would consider a contest and a wager on it?’

‘Capital conceit,’ said Marco Venier, his hand on Cosimo Tiepolo’s arm, feeling the tension in him.

‘What stakes could this man offer that would make me shift?’ sneered Cosimo.

‘I have a thought,’ said the Crow.

William saw the gleam of the lamp on the corner of the Canal Grande and San Maurizio and struck out north along the smaller canal. In moments he could no longer hear the sound of the other man swimming. There was an instant when he thought he heard the sound of feet running, but then silence fell. William was alone.

*The time may have all shadow and
silence in it*

William hauled himself from the water and looked about.

He had re-entered the Canal Grande by the Palazzo Lando. A glance to his right showed him the Campo Erberia, empty at this hour, to his left revealed no sight of Cosimo Tiepolo. Either William had pulled far ahead of his challenger or the man was already out of the canal and making for the Hunchback. Haste was called for whatever the answer.

William ran across the Campo and past the great brick edifice of the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto. Ahead, opposite the church, was the statue of the Hunchback, crouched in the shadow of the steps that ran up its back. William touched it, as those about to embark on a voyage did for luck. He spun about, listening. Where was Cosimo? In front of him the great clock on the front of the church pointed to the eleventh hour. The Campo was silent. William understood in that moment that he had been a fool: there was a reason that Cosimo Tiepolo was nowhere to be seen. When Cosimo had realised William no longer followed hard behind he had simply stopped and waited. If Cosimo vouchsafed that it was he had touched the Hunchback first and then returned, what judge would gainsay him?

Cursing himself for a foolish honest man and the Tiepolos for their treacherous nature, William turned and ran back to the Canal Grande. His only hope now lay in Cosimo's need to guess a plausible gap of time in which to have reached Rialto and returned. The only way to be certain of that was for Cosimo to sit and wait where he might see William returning and then, full-fresh from his rest, dive in and finish the race, ahead of William. William met the canal's edge and once again dived into the water and pulled hard.

His strokes no longer cut cleanly through the water, anger made them shake and shudder. He turned once more from the Canal Grande at the Palazzo Lando. His strong intent was all bent on speed, on remembering his route, and he did not hear the footsteps again running beside the canal nor the splash of another diving into the water. The first he knew of the danger was when an arm pulled him beneath the waters.

Then is sin struck down like an ox

The hand grasped William's leg and heaved. His head dipped and he took in a draught of the foul canal water. Hands grappled his body and dragged him down. William kicked furiously up to reach the surface. He coughed and drew a hasty breath before he was pulled back down below. He twisted in the murk of the canal and wrestled for the arms of the creature holding him. Heat built in his lungs and he fought with all his will not to open his mouth.

Hands pressed against his throat; though what need there was to strangle him when the waters of the canal would drown him he could not think. He almost laughed at the absurdity of it, of his double murder, strangled and then drowned. At last his hands found the arms that held him and felt their way up with an urgent angry caressing that reached shoulder, then neck, then jaw until they came to embrace the face of whatever man it was held him. He dug his thumbs into the eye sockets. At once the waters thrashed about him and he was released, thrust away. William kicked for the surface.

The two men burst from water into air at almost the same instant. The still night was rent with the sound of deep heaves and flailing arms. William drove for the canal's bank and pulled himself on to the street, coughing, heaving, hacking for breath. He had risen to one knee when the boot caught him in the ribs and lifted him away. He rolled with the blow and cracked into the wall of a building. He looked up to see the sole of a boot, water cascading from it, driving at his head. He kicked hard at his attacker's rear foot. Planted as it was, that leg, when William's foot caught the shin, toppled back and the kick that would have dashed William's brains from him skittered off against the cobbles instead, to the music of a howl of pain from his assailant.

William rolled to one side and gained his feet, grasping a loose stone from the ground as he did so. His ribs ached but the pain was not so sharp as to make him think them broken. Two yards from him a figure, as sodden as William, limped around to face him.

'Francesco Tiepolo.'

‘The same, William Fallow, the same Francesco Tiepolo that you have slandered and driven into exile.’

The proud youth who had once strutted before him and threatened vile deeds against Isabella Lisarro now cut a pathetic figure. It was not just that his former finery was gone, replaced with plain weeds besmirched with mud, a matted and sodden hood to hide his golden mane. His hollow cheek and haunted eyes spoke of the price of failure. William revelled in the signs of the punishment that he had brought on Francesco’s head. There was no mercy in him for this one, this man who had threatened his beloved Isabella. Francesco’s eyes held the fixed look that spoke of courage taken by the glass. How had he returned to Venice? The Signoria should have taken him before this moment.

Francesco drew a knife. William’s breath still came in heaves and he looked about for a refuge that might buy him a moment to recover. ‘Will you add to your capital crimes, Francesco?’

‘I have been exiled from Venice. Do I fear death now?’

As he spoke Francesco advanced on William. He brandished the knife before him and William watched it snap back and forth like a flag in a strong wind.

Francesco lunged but William was ready. He had seen in Francesco’s wafting blade a fighter in want of experience. William blessed his friend Hemminges, who had trained him to fight, for a hard taskmaster and a shrewd one. William let his arm drift in front of him as bait. Francesco lunged to cut it and as he did, William struck. He pushed aside Tiepolo’s blade and swung the stone from the street to crack into Francesco’s temple, felling him like an ox.

For a moment William stood over the senseless figure. Then he put his foot on the villain’s side and made to roll him into the canal. A hand gripped his arm.

‘You are not turned executioner yet, William.’

William did not look round at Hemminges’ voice. He took his foot from Francesco’s side.

‘You were watching?’

‘Always, but lost you when you turned aside from the Canal Grande. As must this one have done.’

‘What will you do with him now?’ William asked.

‘Time’s wasting, Will,’ was all Hemminges’ answer.

William tore his eyes from the prone man before him to look on Hemminges’ face. He grinned at his friend, then turned and ran to the end of the street and dove again into the murky waters of Venice.

There is a plot against my life

William now swam cleanly again. It was as though the desperate battling in the waters had let the anger from his blood. Thoughts congealed in the cool of his mind.

Cosimo Tiepolo had known of the feast at the Ca' Venier and that William would be there as a guest. The Tiepolo brothers must have laid their plans accordingly, Cosimo provoking William, threatening a duel that became the prompt to a wager that drew William out, alone into the dark and silent canals of Venice. Yet, wait, was it not the Crow that suggested the wager? Who was he to the Tiepolos? A chance taken or an actor in their scheme? William thought back to when he had first strayed from the Canal Grande to take the crooked route to Rialto. Had he not heard footsteps running? The sound of Francesco forced to alter the place of his ambushade.

It was a bold plot. Why not the hired villain's dagger in the dark? No, that was not Francesco's way, William realised. He wanted to be in at the kill, to taunt and to boast, as he had sought to do when he threatened Isabella. It was that selfish desire to gloat that had drawn Francesco Tiepolo back to Venice, in defiance of the order of exile. How our character exposes us, William thought.

What followed? What followed? William's stroke slowed. A hundred yards ahead he could see the buildings part and the moment when his path would take him from the smaller side canals back on to the Canal Grande. He slowed more and let his strokes become shallower and the more silent for it. William was no longer thinking of haste to return to the Ca' Venier. He knew now how it was that Cosimo intended to gauge the right time: he waited for his brother's report of a murder achieved.