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DAVID LINDSEY

THE COLOR OF NIGHT



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For Joyce,

whose
black and white
illuminates
my
gray

"We are, I know not how, double within
ourselves, with the result that we do not
believe what we believe, and we cannot rid
ourselves of what we condemn."

Michel de Montaigne
Essays (II, 16, 469 C)

**THE
COLOR
OF
NIGHT**

CHAPTER 1

VENICE, SESTIERE DI DORSODURO

It was the middle of the afternoon, and the windows of the old palazzo were partially opened to the crisp spring air. The study, filled with books and artwork obsessively arranged and cataloged and situated, overlooked the narrow canal, and the light that the room received was reflected off the buildings opposite, their weathered colors throwing off pale hues of apricot and lilac, wan ocher and coral and vanilla.

The sounds of the canal rose up on the summer heat and drifted into the room as well, carrying the voices of tourists strolling on the small *fondamenta*, the slosh of a passing gondola, the voices of merchants unloading produce from a small barge, water lapping under the bridge just beyond the window, a woman's laughter.

"Just put them here," the German said to the dealer, spreading his arms out over the long refectory table at which he sat and that he used as a working desk. He had moved aside orderly piles of paperwork and books to provide a clean surface.

The dealer nodded deferentially and approached the

table with an oversize leather portfolio. His name was Claude Corsier, and he was a private art dealer from Geneva. He specialized in the drawings of artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the secondary market. That is, deceased artists. His unusual ceremonious manner was not a demonstration of particular respect for the German client. Corsier was known for his courtesy to everyone, billionaire and housemaid alike. It was said that his manner was a reflection of his lifelong respect for the artwork in which he traded.

Corsier put his portfolio on a small, marble-topped side table a step or two from his client and opened it. He was a large man, with big hands that one normally associated with farmworkers and laborers. But Corsier's hands were pale and soft, his nails manicured; they had never been darkened by the sun or stained by soil or lifted anything heavier than a folio reference book. His burly physique was genetic, not occupational. He had been bookish since childhood.

Each drawing was enclosed in its own acid-free paper folder to protect it. After opening the first folder, Corsier turned it around and placed it on the table before the German.

"First, the Italians you wanted to see. Giovanni Boldini. Becoming very difficult to find these days. Six images here, and a small, quick sketch of a hand on the back of the sheet. These are studies for portraits, it seems, but the finished work, if it was ever completed, has never been identified." Leaning over the refectory table, he gently pointed to an image with the barrel end of a marbled fountain pen. The pen was less intrusive than using one's finger. "The turned head is quite good here," he said.

The German, whose name was Wolfram Schrade, nodded, bending over the sketch to look at it closely. He picked

up a horn-handled magnifying glass from the table and examined each image on the sheet of paper. There were six.

"These are very nice," Schrade said. His accent was heavy, but attractive, sophisticated.

"I like them," Corsier agreed modestly.

The German picked up the paper and looked at the drawing on the back. Corsier watched him as he turned and held it up to the diffused light from the windows. He was a handsome man, tall and lean, in his early fifties. His hair was thick and coarse, and Corsier had always marveled that it very nearly was the exact color of old vellum. His features were fine, a straight, narrow nose, a rather wide mouth with a full lower lip. The irises of his eyes were odd, almost lacking in any pigmentation at all.

Without commenting further, Schrade closed the folder, set it aside, and looked at Corsier, who was already turning to get a second one.

"Ettore Tito," Corsier said, placing the next opened folder before his client. "Studies for *La Perla*, now in a private collection. Very fine nudes. . . . The treatment here"—again the fountain pen pointed out a delicate line—"is exquisite, the way he handled the shadow at this concavity on the shoulder."

Schrade closed the folder and set it aside with the other one.

"And this artist is most difficult to find. . . ." Corsier was unfolding a third folder.

The presentation took up the better part of an hour, and by the time Corsier had shown his client nine works, the most he had ever shown him at one sitting, the light coming into the room from the canal had become richer with the lower angle of the sun. The circular *rulli piombati* panes in

the Renaissance windows were now concentric smears of pastel.

The drawings were stacked at Schrade's left elbow, and Corsier stood in front of the refectory table and folded his soft hands, looking down at the seated client.

"I will have all of them," Schrade said.

Corsier made a slight "as you wish" gesture with his hands. He had sold this man a fortune over the past dozen years, and this lot alone was a small fortune in itself.

"A drink to celebrate?" the German asked.

Corsier tilted his head forward, a bow of assent. Schrade got up from behind his desk and stepped across the marble floor to a sixteenth-century cabinet of dark walnut and opened the doors to reveal bottles of liquor. Two bottles were already opened, and he poured Corsier a glass of Prosecco, the dealer's favored drink with which to close a sale, and a glass of Bordolino for himself.

"Please, sit for a while," he said, giving the *aperitivo* to Corsier and gesturing to a pair of heavy, X-frame wooden armchairs nearer the windows. When they were seated, the German raised his glass and said, "To resolution."

Corsier was already drinking the Prosecco when he realized the toast didn't make any sense to him. He was still swallowing, relishing the movement of the drink on his palate, when Schrade continued.

"I assume you've observed your usual discretion about bringing these to me," he said.

"Of course."

"There is no record that you've come here?"

"None."

"You've always been reliable on that score," Schrade conceded.

"All of my clients require discretion." Corsier took another large drink of the Prosecco.

The next few minutes were spent in casual conversation about drawings. The German was a voracious collector, and Corsier knew that he had large personal collections in his homes in Paris and Berlin. More than likely the drawings Corsier had just sold him would go to one of these two locations, where his client had elaborate archival spaces for exhibiting his collections.

"As for the matter of payment," Schrade said offhandedly, "I'm sure you won't mind if I settle with you later."

Corsier's last sip of Prosecco stuck in his throat and refused to go down. He struggled with it as his thoughts suddenly swarmed, turning, tacking, veering first in one direction, then in another, as he tried to concentrate on the most important implications of what his client had just said.

First of all, this was now the second time. Wolfram Schrade already owed Corsier for a group of symbolists' drawings that Corsier had brought him four months before, perhaps the best group of symbolists that Corsier had ever had in his possession and which he had collected over a period of nearly a year, specifically with this client in mind. There had been an even dozen drawings of extraordinary quality. It had come to 1.3 million Deutsche marks. Corsier had taken them to the German's Berlin home. Where he had left them. With only a promise of payment.

That was not so extraordinary. It wasn't an entirely comfortable position to be in, but he had known his client for twelve years and had never had any trouble collecting. So he had taken a deep breath. . . .

Now this. Nine drawings by the increasingly popular nineteenth-century Italian realists. Almost a million Deutsche marks. The German's assumption that Corsier

would carry him yet again was appalling. Especially since in the corner behind the refectory table sat a computer. Its screen was dark, but a small lime green light burned on the keyboard, proving to Corsier that it still had a heartbeat. On more than a few occasions Schrade had turned around at his desk—in Paris or Berlin or here—and paid Corsier instantly from his accounts in Liechtenstein or Cyprus. So Corsier knew that it could be done. He was just an electrical spark away from two million Deutsche marks.

He managed to swallow the Prosecco.

The more serious implication of Schrade's remark, the one that had caused a sudden empty space in Corsier's chest, a huge cavity without tissue or feeling or breath, was the implication that these two reversals in their relationship—for, to a man of Corsier's sensibilities, they were irrefutably reversals—were premonitory.

Schrade *knew!*

Corsier looked at his client, whose neutral coloring was a perfect foil for the dusty colors that fell on him, the failing light passing through the concentric striations in the small panes of the windows. He heard a gondola, the thick *chuck-chuck-chuck* of the oar in the rowlock as the boat was propelled along the canal. He concentrated, desperate to absorb everything in these last moments. Was that a cat mewling? A barrel, or something like it, being rolled along the *fondamenta*? What could it be if not a barrel? A cart?

All of this aural sensitivity had gone through his brain in an instant, no longer than it had taken him to swallow the imperceptibly hesitant Prosecco. After all, Corsier was a professional. He had been an operator most of his adult life, and he had done nearly all of his work in the brutal, high-stakes world of wealthy men. He had survived, and he had been successful. Corsier had brass balls, as a matter of fact.

Though, to be sure, he himself would never, ever, have expressed it in such crass language.

"Oh," he said, lowering his glass. "This is very awkward for me, I'm afraid." He knitted his brow and looked squarely at Schrade. "This seriously affects my liquidity. After accommodating your last request . . . well, this is most difficult."

"Difficult?" Schrade smiled ever so slightly. "Well, I certainly understand the awkwardness of a loss of . . . liquidity."

It was a pointed remark. Corsier knew that his client was never going to baldly state the real subject of this conversation. Corsier pursed his mouth thoughtfully as though he were trying to ferret out a mutually agreeable resolution. In fact, he was concentrating as he had never concentrated before in his life, bringing to bear his entire genetic code on one single thing: not bolting for the door.

He was stunned at how complete, how all consuming, was his fear.

How would it happen? A gunshot? Poison? Torture to make him tell everything, even things he could no longer remember himself, and then end it with simple asphyxiation? Why this charade first? This cruel pretense of civility? He couldn't imagine, but he struggled with the nausea and continued to play his own part flawlessly.

"This is really quite irregular. Very difficult for me."

"I'm sorry," Schrade said, which he clearly was not.

"How long do you think you will need to delay payment?"

"Payment? Oh, I plan to resolve this as quickly as possible."

The double meanings shimmered before Corsier's sightless eyes. Venice, he thought, what a monumental sur-

prise to die in Venice. He would never have imagined it. Never.

As he rode in his host's private launch back down the Grand Canal on his way to Marco Polo Airport, Claude Corsier was numb with fear. He was also tremulous with hope. There was the launch driver and a companion. After they passed through the mouth of the Grand Canal and skirted San Giorgio Maggiore, more than ten kilometers remained across the lagoon to the airport. He looked at the two men in front of him. Was one of them the executioner? Surely not. They hardly paid him any attention.

My God, Corsier thought, if he ever got away from this situation, he would disappear so thoroughly that he would become as invisible as breath.

The wind picked up and the launch slapped the waves with a hard, rhythmic jolt, throwing a light spray from the hull. A short distance away he could see the public *vaporettos* filled with tourists headed to the same destination. He fought to avoid hyperventilation. His thoughts swung wildly back and forth between black, oppressive fear and an almost giddy exhilaration.

Then he thought of the drawings. Holy Mary. The wretched German was going to get twenty-one of some of the finest drawings Corsier had ever possessed . . . for absolutely nothing.

CHAPTER 2

HOUSTON

The first time he saw her was through the clear, moonstone colors of water. Suddenly she entered his peripheral vision, gliding past him in the opposite direction, her long legs close together and scissoring gently, trailing an unstrung necklace of tiny silver bubbles.

She wore a black, membrane-sheer suit, and her dark hair, pulled back from her face and held in place by a single band at the nape of her neck, spread out behind her like a billow of ink let loose in the water. Though she wore a small pair of swimming goggles that partially obscured her eyes, he could see from the shape of her face and mouth that she was Asian.

That morning she got out of the pool only a few minutes before he did. By the time he had completed his last lap and pulled himself from the water, she was nearly finished drying off, bending to towel between her thighs, her wet hair pulled to one side and draped over her shoulder. Without acknowledging him, she turned and walked away beside the pool toward the women's dressing room, nonchalant, as