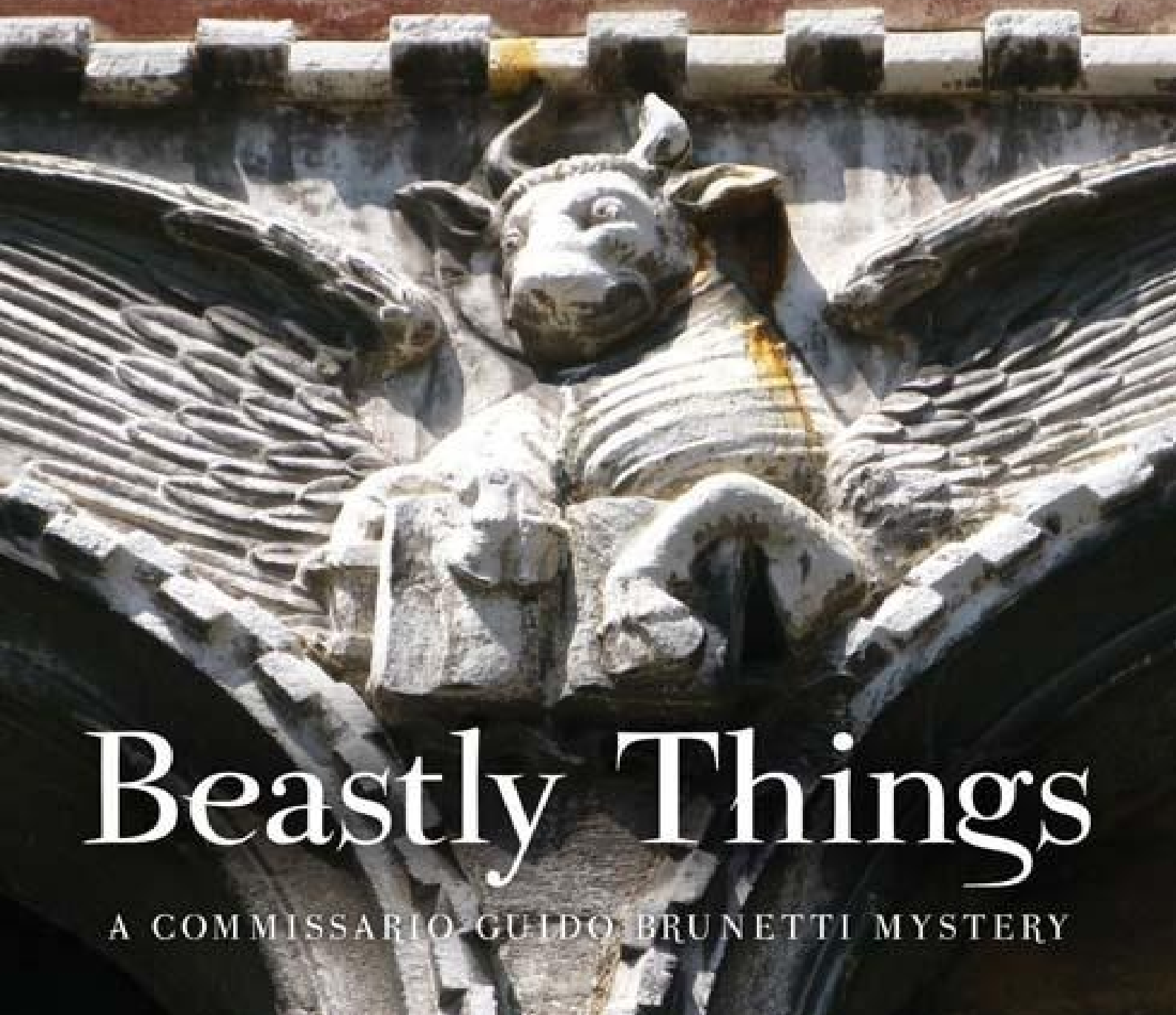


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DONNA LEON



Beastly Things

A COMMISSARIO-GUIDO BRUNETTI MYSTERY

Beastly Things

Also by Donna Leon

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Death in a Strange Country
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Death and Judgment
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Donna Leon

Beastly
Things



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For Fabio Moretti and Umberto Branchini

*Va tacito e nascosto,
quand' avido è di preda,
l' astuto cacciator.
E chi è a mal far disposto,
non brama che si veda
l' inganno del suo cor.*

When intent on his prey,
the clever hunter
moves silently and hidden.
And he who wants to do evil
is not eager
that the evil in his heart be seen.

Giulio Cesare
Handel

1

The man lay still, as still as a piece of meat on a slab, as still as death itself. Though the room was cold, his only covering was a thin cotton sheet that left his head and neck free. From a distance, his chest rose inordinately high, as though some sort of support had been wedged under his back, running the length of it. If this white form were a snow-covered mountain ridge and the viewer a tired hiker at the end of a long day, faced with the task of crossing it, the hiker would surely choose to walk along the entire length of the man to cross at the ankles and not the chest. The ascent was too high and too steep, and who knew what difficulties there would be descending the other side?

From the side, the unnatural height of the chest was obvious; from above – if the hiker were now placed on a peak and could gaze down at the man – it was the neck that was conspicuous. The neck – or perhaps more accurately the lack of one. In fact, his neck was a broad column running down straight from beneath his ears to his shoulders. There was no narrowing, no indentation; the neck was as wide as the head.

Also conspicuous was the nose, now barely evident in profile. It had been crushed and pushed to one side; scratches and tiny indentations patterned the skin. The right cheek, as well, was scratched and bruised. His entire face was swollen, the skin white and flaccid. From above, his flesh sank in a concave arc below his cheekbones. His face was pale with more than the pallor of death. This was a man who had lived indoors.

The man had dark hair and a short beard, grown perhaps in an attempt to disguise the neck, but there was no disguising such a thing for more than a second. The beard provided a visual distraction, but almost instantly it would be seen as camouflage, nothing more, for it ran along the jaw line and down that column of a neck, as if it did not know where to stop. From this height, it looked almost as though it had flowed down across the neck and off to the sides, an effect exaggerated by the way the beard grew increasingly white at the sides.

His ears were surprisingly delicate, almost feminine. Earrings would not have looked out of place there, were it not for the beard. Below the left ear, just beyond the end of the beard and set at a thirty-degree angle, was a pink scar. About three centimetres long, it was as wide as a pencil; the skin was rough, as though whoever had sewn the skin shut had been in a hurry or careless because he was a man, and a scar was nothing for a man to worry about.

It was cold in the room, the only sound the heavy wheeze of the air conditioning. The man's thick chest did not move up and down, nor did he stir uncomfortably in the cold. He lay there, naked under his sheet, eyes closed. He did not wait, for he was beyond waiting, just as he was beyond being late or being on time. One might be tempted to say that the man simply was. But that would be untrue, for he was no more.

Two other forms lay, similarly covered, in the room, though they were closer to the walls: the bearded man was in the centre. If a man who always lies tells someone he is

a liar, is he telling the truth? If no one is alive in a room, is the room empty?

A door was opened on the far side and held open by a tall, thin man in a white lab jacket. He stood there long enough for another man to pass in front of him and enter the room. The first man released the door; it closed slowly, giving a quiet, almost liquid click that sounded loud in the cold room.

‘He’s over there, Guido,’ Dottor Rizzardi said, coming up behind Guido Brunetti, Commissario di Polizia of the city of Venice. Brunetti stopped, in the manner of the hiker, and looked across at the white-covered ridge of the man. Rizzardi walked past him to the slab on which the dead man lay.

‘He was stabbed in the lower back three times with a very thin blade. Less than two centimetres wide, I’d say, and whoever did it was very good or very lucky. There are two small bruises on the front of his left arm,’ Rizzardi said, stopping beside the body. ‘And water in his lungs,’ he added. ‘So he was alive when he went into the water. But the killer got a major vein: he didn’t have a chance. He bled to death in minutes.’ Then, grimly, Rizzardi added, ‘Before he could drown.’ Before Brunetti could ask, the pathologist said, ‘It happened last night, some time after midnight, I’d say. Because he’s been in the water, that’s as close as I can come.’

Brunetti remained halfway to the table, his eyes going back and forth between the dead man and the pathologist. ‘What happened to his face?’ Brunetti asked, aware of how difficult it would be to recognize a photo of him; indeed, how difficult it would be even to look at a photo of that broken, swollen face.

‘My guess is that he fell forward when he was stabbed. He was probably too stunned to put out his hands to break his fall.’

‘Could you take a photo?’ Brunetti asked, wondering if Rizzardi could disguise some of the damage.

‘You want to ask people to look at it?’ It was not an answer Brunetti liked, but it was an answer. Then, after a moment, the pathologist said, ‘I’ll do what I can.’

Brunetti asked, ‘What else?’

‘I’d say he’s in his late forties, in reasonably good health, isn’t someone who works with his hands, but I can’t say more than that.’

‘Why is he such an odd shape?’ Brunetti asked as he approached the table.

‘You mean his chest?’ Rizzardi asked.

‘And the neck,’ Brunetti added, his eyes drawn to its thickness.

‘It’s something called Madelung’s disease,’ Rizzardi said. ‘I’ve read about it, and I remember it from med school, but I’ve never seen it before. Only the photos.’

‘What causes it?’ Brunetti asked, coming to stand beside the dead man.

Rizzardi shrugged. ‘Who knows?’ As if he’d himself just heard a doctor saying such a thing, he quickly added, ‘There’s a common link to alcoholism, sometimes drug use, though not in his case. He wasn’t a drinker, not at all, and I didn’t see signs of drug use.’ He paused, then went on, ‘Most alcoholics don’t get it, thank God, but most of the men who get it – and it’s almost always men – are alcoholics. No one seems to understand why it happens.’

Stepping closer to the corpse, Rizzardi pointed to the neck, which was especially thick at the back, where Brunetti could see what appeared to be a small hump. Before he could ask about it, Rizzardi continued, ‘It’s fat. It accumulates here,’ he said, pointing to the hump. ‘And here.’ He indicated what looked like breasts under the

white cloth, in the place where they would be on the body of a woman.

‘It starts when they’re in their thirties or forties, concentrates on the top part of the body.’

‘You mean it just grows?’ Brunetti asked, trying to imagine such a thing.

‘Yes. Sometimes on the top part of the legs, too. But in his case it’s only the neck and chest.’ He paused in thought for a moment and then added, ‘It turns them into barrels, poor devils.’

‘Is it common?’ Brunetti asked.

‘No, not at all. I think there’s only a few hundred cases in the literature.’ He shrugged. ‘We really don’t know very much.’

‘Anything else?’

‘He was dragged along a rough surface,’ the pathologist said, leading Brunetti to the bottom of the table and lifting the sheet. He pointed to the back of the dead man’s heel, where the skin was scratched and broken. ‘There’s evidence on his lower back, as well.’

‘Of what?’ Brunetti asked.

‘Someone grabbed him under the shoulders and dragged him across a floor, I’d say. There’s no gravel in the wound,’ he said, ‘so it was probably a stone floor.’ To clarify things, Rizzardi added, ‘He was wearing only one shoe, a loafer. That suggests the other one was pulled off.’

Brunetti took a few steps back to the man’s head and looked down at the bearded face. ‘Does he have light eyes?’ he asked

Rizzardi glanced at him, his surprise evident. ‘Blue. How did you know?’

‘I didn’t,’ Brunetti answered.

‘Then why did you ask?’

‘I think I’ve seen him somewhere,’ Brunetti answered. He stared at the man, his face, the beard, the broad column of his neck. But memory failed him, beyond his certainty about the eyes.

‘If you did see him, you’d be likely to remember him, wouldn’t you?’ The man’s body was sufficient answer to Rizzardi’s question.

Brunetti nodded. ‘I know, but if I think about him, nothing’s there.’ His failure to remember something as exceptional as this man’s appearance bothered Brunetti more than he wanted to admit. Had he seen a photo, a mug shot, or had it been a print in something he’d read? He’d leafed through Lombroso’s vile book a few years ago: did this man do nothing more than remind him of one of those carriers of ‘hereditary criminality’?

But the Lombroso prints had been in black and white; would eyes have shown up as light or dark? Brunetti searched for the image his memory must have held, stared at the opposite wall to try to aid it. But nothing came, no clear image of a blue-eyed man, neither this one nor any other.

Instead, his memory filled almost to suffocation with the unsummoned picture of his mother, slumped in her chair, staring at him with vacant eyes that failed to know him.

‘Guido?’ he heard someone say and turned to see the familiar face of Rizzardi.

‘You all right?’

Brunetti forced a smile and said, ‘Yes. I was just trying to remember where I might have seen him.’

‘Leave it alone for a while and it might come back,’ Rizzardi suggested. ‘Happens to me all the time. I can’t remember someone’s name, and I start through the alphabet – A, B, C – and often when I get to the first letter of their name, it comes back to me.’

‘Is it age?’ Brunetti asked with studied lack of interest.

‘I certainly hope so,’ Rizzardi answered lightly. ‘I had a wonderful memory in medical school: you can’t get through without it: all those bones, those nerves, the muscles . . .’

‘The diseases,’ volunteered Brunetti.

‘Yes, those too. But just remembering all the parts of this,’ the pathologist said, flipping the backs of his hands down the front of his own body, ‘that’s a triumph.’ Then, more reflectively, ‘But what’s inside, that’s a miracle.’

‘Miracle?’ Brunetti asked.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Rizzardi said. ‘Something wonderful.’ Rizzardi looked at his friend and must have seen something he liked, or trusted, for he went on, ‘If you think about it, the most ordinary things we do – picking up a glass, tying our shoes, whistling . . . they’re all tiny miracles.’

‘Then why do you do what you do?’ Brunetti asked, surprising himself with the question.

‘What?’ Rizzardi asked. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Work with people after the miracles are over,’ Brunetti said for want of a better way to say it.

There was a long pause before Rizzardi answered. At last he said, ‘I never thought of it that way.’ He looked down at his own hands, turned them over and studied the palms for a moment. ‘Maybe it’s because what I do lets me see more clearly the way things work, the things that make the miracles possible.’

As if suddenly embarrassed, Rizzardi clasped his hands together and said, ‘The men who brought him in said there were no papers. No identification. Nothing.’

‘Clothing?’

Rizzardi shrugged. ‘They bring them in here naked. Your men must have taken everything back to the lab.’

Brunetti made a noise of agreement or understanding or perhaps of thanks. ‘I’ll go over there and have a look. The report I read said they found him at about six.’

Rizzardi shook his head. ‘I don’t know anything about that, only that he was the first one today.’

Surprised – this was Venice, after all – Brunetti asked, ‘How many more were there?’

Rizzardi nodded towards the two fully draped figures on the other side of the room. ‘Those old people over there.’

‘How old?’

‘The son says his father was ninety-three, his mother ninety.’

‘What happened?’ Brunetti asked. He had read the papers that morning, but no mention had been made of their deaths.

‘One of them made coffee last night. The pot was in the sink. The flame went out, but the gas was still on.’ Rizzardi added, ‘It was an old stove, the kind you need a match for.’

Then, before Brunetti could speak, the doctor went on, ‘The neighbour upstairs

smelled gas and called the firemen, and when they went in they found the place full of gas, the two of them dead on top of the bed. The cups and saucers were beside them.'

In the face of Brunetti's silence, Rizzardi added, 'It's a good thing the place didn't blow up.'

'It's a strange place for people to drink coffee,' Brunetti said.

Rizzardi gave his friend a sharp look. 'She had Alzheimer's and he didn't have the money to put her anywhere,' then added, 'The son has three kids and lives in a two-bedroom apartment in Mogliano.'

Brunetti said nothing.

'The son told me,' Rizzardi continued, 'that his father said he couldn't take care of her any more, not the way he wanted to.'

'Said?'

'He left a note. Said he didn't want people to think he was losing his memory and had forgotten to turn the gas off.' Rizzardi turned away from the dead and moved towards the door. 'He had a pension of five hundred and twelve Euros, and she had five hundred and eight.' Then, like doom itself, he added, 'Their rent was seven hundred and fifty a month.'

'I see,' Brunetti said.

Rizzardi opened the door and let them into the corridor of the hospital.

2

They walked down the corridor in companionable silence, Brunetti's thoughts divided between his own lingering terror at his mother's fate and Rizzardi's talk of a 'miracle'. Well, who better to contemplate that than someone who had it under his hands every day?

He considered the note the old man had left for his son, words written from the heart of something Brunetti found so fearful that he could not bear to name it. It had been deliberately willed, this opting out of life, and the old man had chosen it for both of them. But first he had made their coffee. With a deliberate lurch of his mind, Brunetti freed himself from the room where the two old people had drunk their coffee and the inevitability of the choice that had moved them from that place to the chill room where he had seen them.

He turned to Rizzardi and asked, 'Is there a way I could use this Marlung disease – if he's being treated for it – as a way to find out who he is?'

'Madelung,' Rizzardi corrected automatically, then went on, 'You might send an official request for information to the hospitals with centres for genetic diseases, with a description of him.' Then, after a moment's reflection, the doctor added, 'Assuming he's been diagnosed, that is.'

Thinking back to the man he had seen on the table, Brunetti asked, 'But how could he not be? Diagnosed, that is. You saw his neck, the size of him.'

Outside the door to his office, Rizzardi turned to Brunetti and said, 'Guido, there are people walking around everywhere with symptoms of serious disease so visible they'd cause any doctor's hair to catch fire if they saw them.'

'And?' Brunetti asked.

'And they tell themselves it's nothing, that it will go away if they just ignore it. They'll stop coughing, the bleeding will stop, the thing on their leg will disappear.'

'And?'

'And sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't.'

'And if it doesn't?' Brunetti asked.

'Then I get to see them,' Rizzardi said grimly. He gave himself a shake, as if, like Brunetti, he wanted to free himself of certain thoughts, and added, 'I know someone at Padova who might know about Madelung: I'll call her. That's the likely place someone from the Veneto would go.'

And if he's not from the Veneto? Brunetti found himself wondering, but he said nothing to the pathologist. Instead, he thanked him and asked if he wanted to go down to the bar for a coffee.

'No, thanks. Like yours, my life is filled with papers and reports, and I planned to waste the rest of my morning reading them and writing them.'

Brunetti accepted his decision with a nod and started towards the main entrance of the hospital. A lifetime of good health had done nothing to counter the effects of imagination; thus Brunetti was often subject to the attacks of diseases to which he had

not been exposed and of which he displayed no symptoms. Paola was the only person he had ever told about this, though his mother, while she was still capable of knowing things, had known, or at least suspected. Paola managed to see the absurdity of his uneasiness: it is too much to call them fears, since a large part of him was never persuaded that he actually had the disease in question.

His imagination scorned banal things like heart disease or flu, often upping the ante and giving himself West Nile Fever or meningitis. Malaria, once. Diabetes, though unknown in his family, was an old and frequently visiting friend. Part of him knew these diseases served as lightning rods to keep his mind from suspecting that any loss of memory, however momentary, was the first symptom of what he really feared. Better a night mulling over the bizarre symptoms of dengue fever than the flash of alarm that came when he failed to remember the number of Vianello's *telefonino*.

Brunetti turned his thoughts to the man with the neck: he had begun to think of him in those terms. His eyes were blue, which meant Brunetti must have seen him somewhere or seen a photo of him: nothing else would explain his certainty.

Mind on autopilot, Brunetti continued towards the Questura. Crossing over Rio di S. Giovanni, he checked the waters for signs of the seaweed that had, during the last few years, been snaking its way deeper into the heart of the city. He consulted his mental map and saw that it would drift up the Rio dei Greci, if it came. Certainly there was enough of it and to spare slopping out there against Riva degli Schiavoni: it hardly needed a strong tide to propel it into the viscera of the city.

He noticed it then, unruly patches floating towards him on the incoming tide. He remembered seeing, a decade ago, the flat-nosed boats with their front-end scoops, chugging about in the *laguna*, dining on the giant drifts of seaweed. Where had they gone and what were they doing now, those odd little boats, silly and stunted but oh, so voraciously useful? He had crossed the causeway on a train last week, flanked by vast islands of floating weed. Boats skirted them; birds avoided them; nothing could survive beneath them. Did no one else notice, or was everyone meant to pretend they weren't there? Or was the jurisdiction of the waters of the *laguna* divided up among warring authorities – the city, the region, the province, the Magistrate of the Waters – parcelled and wrapped up so tightly as to make motion impossible?

As Brunetti walked, his thoughts unrolled and wandered where they chose. In the past, when he encountered a person he had met somewhere, he occasionally recognized them without remembering who they were. Often, along with that physical recognition came the memory of an emotional aura – he could think of no more apt term – they had left with him. He knew he liked them or disliked them, though the reasons for that feeling had disappeared along with their identity.

Seeing the man with the neck – he had to stop calling him that – had made Brunetti uneasy, for the emotional aura that had come with the memory of the colour of his eyes was uncertain, bringing with it a sense of Brunetti's desire to help him. It was impossible to sort his way through this. The place where he had just seen the man made it obvious that someone had failed to help him or that he had failed to help himself, but there was no reconstructing now whether it was the sight of him earlier that day or the sense of having seen him before that had prompted this urge in Brunetti.

Still mulling this over, he entered the Questura and headed towards his office.

About to start up the final flight of steps, he turned back and went into the room shared by members of the uniformed branch. Pucetti sat at the computer, his attention riveted to the screen as his hands flew over the keys. Brunetti stopped just inside the door. Pucetti might as well have been on some other planet, so little was he conscious of the room in which he sat.

As Brunetti watched, Pucetti's body grew ever tenser, his breathing tighter. The young officer began to mutter to himself, or perhaps to the computer. Without warning, Pucetti's face, and then his body, relaxed. He pulled his hands from the keys, stared a moment at the screen, then raised his right hand, index finger extended, and jabbed at a single key in the manner of a jazz pianist hitting the final note he knew would bring the audience to its feet.

Pucetti's hand bounced away from the keys and stopped, forgotten, at the level of his ear, his eyes still on the screen. Whatever he saw there lifted him to his feet, both arms jammed above his head in the gesture made by every triumphant athlete Brunetti had ever seen on the sports page. 'Got you, you bastard!' the young officer shouted, waving his fists wildly over his head and shifting his weight back and forth on his feet. It wasn't a war dance, but it was close. Alvise and Riverre, standing together at the other side of the room, turned towards the noise and motion, their surprise evident.

Brunetti took a few steps into the room. 'What have you done, Pucetti?' he asked, then added, 'Who'd you get?'

Pucetti, radiant with a mixture of glee and triumph that took a decade off his face, turned to his superior. 'Those bastards at the airport,' he said, punctuating his statement with two quick uppercuts into the air above his head.

'The baggage handlers?' Brunetti asked, though it was hardly necessary. He had been investigating them and arresting them for almost a decade.

'Sì.' Pucetti failed to restrain a hoot of wild success, and his dancing feet took two more triumphant steps.

Alvise and Riverre, intrigued, moved towards them.

'What did you do?' Brunetti asked.

With an act of will, Pucetti brought his feet together and lowered his hands. 'I got into . . .' he began and then, glancing at his fellow officers, said, enthusiasm fading from his voice, 'some information about one of them, sir.'

All excitement disappeared from Pucetti's manner; Brunetti took the hint and responded with studied indifference. 'Well, good for you. You must tell me about it some time.' Then, to Alvise, 'Could you come up to my office for a moment?' He had no idea what to say to Alvise, so inadequate was the man's ability to grasp anything he was told, but Brunetti sensed he had to distract the two officers from paying any attention to what Pucetti had said or attributing to it any importance.

Alvise saluted and gave Riverre a look from which self-importance was not absent. 'Riverre,' Brunetti said, 'could you go down to the man on the door and ask him if the package has arrived for me?' To prepare for the inevitable, he added, 'If it hasn't come, don't bother to tell me. It'll come tomorrow.'

Riverre loved tasks, and to the degree that they were simple and explained clearly, he could usually perform them. He too saluted and turned towards the door, leaving Brunetti to regret he had not thought of some request that would have got them both out of the room. 'Come along, Alvise,' he said.

As Brunetti began to shepherd Alvisè towards the door, Pucetti took his place at the computer and hit a few keys; Brunetti watched the screen grow dark.

3

Brunetti found it perversely fitting to be going upstairs with Alvis, since making conversation with him was so often an uphill climb. He tried to stay on the same step as the slower-moving officer so as not to make even more evident the difference in their height. 'I wanted to ask you,' Brunetti invented as they reached the top, 'how you think the mood of the men is.'

'Mood, sir?' Alvis asked with eager curiosity. To show his willingness to cooperate, he gave a nervous smile to suggest he would do so as soon as he understood.

'Whether they feel positive about the work and about being here,' Brunetti said, as uncertain as Alvis apparently was about what he might mean by 'mood'. Alvis fought to preserve his smile.

'Since you've known many of them for so long, I thought they might have spoken to you.'

'About what, sir?'

Brunetti asked himself if anyone in possession of all his faculties would confide in Alvis or ask his opinion about anything. 'Or you might have heard something.' No sooner had Brunetti said that than it occurred to him that Alvis might take this as an invitation to spy and be offended by the offer, though for Alvis to take offence was as unlikely as his ability to see a hidden meaning in anything.

Alvis stopped at Brunetti's door and asked, 'You mean, do they like it here, sir?'

Brunetti put on an easy smile and said, 'Yes, good way to put it, Alvis.'

'I think some of us do and some of us don't, sir,' he said sagely, then hastened to add, 'I'm one of the ones who do, sir. You can count on that.'

Prolonging the smile, Brunetti said, 'Oh, that was never in doubt: but I was curious about the others and hoped you'd know.'

Alvis blushed. Then he said, voice hesitant, 'I suppose you don't want me to tell any of the boys you asked, eh?'

'No, perhaps better not to,' Brunetti answered; Alvis must have expected this answer, for no disappointment showed in his face. Conscious of how easily the kindness came into his voice, Brunetti asked, 'Something else, Alvis?'

The officer put his hands in the pockets of his trousers, looked at his shoes, as if to find the question he wanted to ask written there, looked at Brunetti, and said, 'Could I tell my wife, sir? That you asked me?' He placed unconscious emphasis on the final word.

Only by force of will did Brunetti stop himself from putting his arm around Alvis's shoulder to give him a hug. 'Of course, Alvis. I'm sure I can trust her as much as I do you.'

'Oh, much more, sir,' Alvis said with accidental truth. Then, briskly, 'Is that package big, sir?'

Momentarily at a loss, Brunetti merely repeated, 'Package?'

‘The one that’s coming, sir. If it is, I could help Riverre bring it up.’

‘Ah, of course,’ Brunetti said, feeling like the captain of the school soccer team asked by a first-year student if he wanted him to hold his ankles while he did sit-ups. Then, quickly, ‘No, thanks, Alvisè. It’s very generous of you to offer, but it’s only an envelope with some files in it.’

‘All right, sir. But I thought I’d ask. In case it was. Heavy, that is.’

‘Thanks again,’ Brunetti said and opened the door to his office.

The sight of a computer on his desk drove all lingering concern with Alvisè and his sensibilities from Brunetti’s mind. He approached it with something between trepidation and curiosity. He had been told nothing: his request to have his own computer was so old that Brunetti had quite forgotten both about the request and the possibility that one of his own might someday materialize.

He saw that the screen carried the command: ‘Please choose a password and confirm it. Then press “Enter”. If you want me to have the password, press “Enter” twice.’ Brunetti sat and studied the instructions, read them again, and considered their significance. Signorina Elettra – it could have been no one else – had organized this, had no doubt loaded the computer with those things he would need, and had set up a system that would make intrusion impossible. He began to consider the options: sooner or later, he would need advice, would work himself into a corner from which he would need to extricate himself. And she, being the mind behind the design, would be the one to help him. He did not know if she would need his password in order to untangle whatever mess he had made.

And he didn’t care. He hit ‘Enter’ once, and then once again.

The screen flickered. If he expected some acknowledgement from her to flash across the screen, he was disappointed: all that appeared was the usual list of icons for the programs available to him. He opened his email accounts, both the official one at the Questura and his personal account. The first held nothing of interest; the second was empty. He typed in Signorina Elettra’s work address, then the single word ‘*Grazie*’, and sent it off without signature. He waited for the answering ping of her reply, but nothing came.

Brunetti, proud of himself for having hit that second ‘Enter’ without having given it much thought, was struck by how technology had colonized human emotions: to tell someone your password was now the equivalent of giving them the key to your heart. Or at least to your correspondence. Or your bank account. He knew Paola’s, always forgot it, and so had written it in his address book under James: ‘*madamemerle*’, no caps, all one word, an unsettling choice.

He connected to the internet and was astonished by the speed of the connection. Soon no doubt he’d find it normal, and then he’d find it slow.

He typed in the correct name of the disease, Madelung, and was instantly confronted with a series of articles in Italian and in English. He chose the first and, for the next twenty minutes, doggedly read through the symptoms and proposed treatments, learning little more than Rizzardi had told him. Almost always men, almost always drinkers, almost always without a cure, with quite a high concentration of the disease in Italy.

He clicked the program closed and decided to take care of unfinished business: he called down to the officers’ room to ask Pucetti to come up. When the young man

arrived, Brunetti gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

Before sitting, Pucetti gave a look he could not disguise at Brunetti's computer. His eyes shot to his superior and then back to the computer, as if he had difficulty pairing the one with the other. Brunetti resisted the impulse to smile and tell the young officer that, if he did his homework and kept his room clean, he'd let him take it for a ride. Instead, he said, 'Tell me.'

Pucetti did not bother pretending not to understand. 'The one we've arrested three times – Buffaldi – has gone on two first-class cruises in the last two years. He has a new car parked in the garage at Piazzale Roma. And his wife bought a new apartment last year: declared price was 250,000 Euros, but the real price was 350,000.' Pucetti held up a finger with each fact, then folded his hands and put them in his lap to signify that he had nothing else to say.

'How did you get this information?' Brunetti asked.

The younger man looked down at his folded hands. 'I had a look at his financial records.'

'I think I could have figured that much out, Pucetti,' Brunetti said in a calm voice. 'How did you gain access to that information?'

'I did it on my own, sir,' Pucetti said in a firm voice. 'She didn't help me. Not at all.'

Brunetti sighed. If a safe-cracker files off a layer of skin to sensitize his pupil's fingertips or teaches him how to blow a lock, who's responsible for opening the safe? Each time Brunetti himself used his burglar tools to open a door, how much responsibility fell to the thief who had taught him how to use them? And, given that Brunetti had passed this skill on to Vianello, who bore the guilt for every door the Inspector managed to open?

'Your defence of Signorina Elettra is admirable, Pucetti, and your skill is a credit to her pedagogical capabilities.' He refused to smile. 'I had something more practical in mind with my question, however: what did you open and what information did you steal?'

Brunetti watched Pucetti fight down his pride and his confusion at his superior's apparent displeasure. 'His credit card records, sir.'

'And the apartment?' Brunetti asked, forbearing to remark that most people did not buy apartments with credit cards.

'I found out who the notary was who handled the sale.'

Brunetti waited, irony carefully placed aside.

'And I know someone who works in his office,' Pucetti added.

'Who?'

'I'd rather not say, sir,' Pucetti answered, his eyes in his lap.

'Admirable sentiment,' Brunetti said. 'This person confirmed the difference in price?'

Pucetti looked up at this. 'She wasn't sure, sir, but she said that when they discussed the sale with the notary, they made no secret that the difference in price would be at least a hundred thousand.'

'I see.' Brunetti allowed some time to pass, during which Pucetti twice glanced at the computer, as if memorizing the name and dimensions. 'And where does this lead us?'

Pucetti looked up eagerly. 'Isn't it enough to reopen the investigation? He makes about fifteen hundred Euros a month at that job. Where else does this money come from? He's been filmed opening suitcases and taking things from them: jewels, cameras, computers.' He paused, as though he were not the one who should be answering questions.

'The filming was dismissed as evidence during the last trial, as you know, Pucetti, and we are not yet at a place where the mere possession of large amounts of money is proof that it was stolen.' Brunetti kept calm, imitating the voice of the defence attorney the last time the baggage handlers had been accused of theft. 'He could have won the lottery, or his wife could have. He could have borrowed the money from members of his family. He could have found it in the street.'

'But you know he didn't, sir,' Pucetti pleaded. 'You know what he's doing, what the lot of them are doing.'

'What I know and what a prosecutor can prove in a court of law are entirely different matters, Pucetti,' Brunetti said, not without a note of reprimand in his voice. 'And I suggest very strongly that you consider this fact.' He saw the young man open his mouth to protest and raised his voice to stop him. 'Further, I want you to go back and very carefully cancel any traces you might have left during your investigation of Signor Buffaldi's finances.' Before Pucetti could object, he added, 'If you managed to find them, then someone else will be able to find that you have been there, and that information would render Signor Buffaldi untouchable for the rest of his career.'

'He's pretty much untouchable now, isn't he?' Pucetti said, voice just short of anger.

That was enough to spark Brunetti's own. Impetuous boy, thinking he could change things: so much the way Brunetti had been decades ago, just sworn into the force and keen to work for justice. The memory calmed Brunetti, who said, 'Pucetti, the system we have is the one we have to use. To criticize it is as useless as to praise it. You know and I know how limited our powers are.'

As if giving in to a force stronger than his power to resist it, Pucetti said, 'But what about her? She finds out things, and you use them.' Brunetti was again conscious of Pucetti's zeal.

'Pucetti, I saw your face when I told you to cancel your traces: you know you left some. If you can't eliminate them, then ask Signorina Elettra to help you do so. I don't want this case made more difficult than it is.'

'But unless you use this . . .' Pucetti said in a high voice.

Staring him down, Brunetti continued in a tight voice. 'I have the information, Pucetti. I've had it since they booked the tickets for the cruises and bought the car, and bought the house. So go back and remove your traces, and don't ever think of doing something like this without my knowledge, without my authorization.'

'What's the difference?' Pucetti asked, in a voice that sought information, not sarcastic revenge. 'About how you got it?'

How much to trust him? How to stop Pucetti from dragging them into a legal swamp while still encouraging him to take chances? 'She doesn't leave traces and you do.'

Then Brunetti picked up his phone and dialled Signorina Elettra's number. When she answered, he said, 'Signorina. I'm just going out for a coffee. Do you think you could step up to my office while I'm gone? Pucetti has some changes he has to make