

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Blood from a Stone

Donna Leon

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## About the Book

On a cold Venetian night shortly before Christmas, a street vendor is killed in Campo Santo Stefano. The closest witnesses to the event are the tourists who had been browsing the man's wares before his death - fake handbags of every designer label. The dead man had been working as a *vú cumprá*, one of the many Black Africans purveying goods out of hours, trading without work permits.

When Commissario Brunetti arrives on the scene, his response is that of everybody involved: why would anyone kill an illegal immigrant? They have few social connections and little money; in-fighting is the obvious answer. But once Brunetti begins to investigate this unfamiliar Venetian underworld, he discovers that matters of great value are at stake...

## About the Author

Donna Leon has lived in Venice for many years and previously lived in Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Iran and China, where she worked as a teacher. Her previous novels featuring Commissario Brunetti have all been highly acclaimed; including *Friends in High Places*, which won the CWA Macallan Silver Dagger for Fiction, *Through a Glass, Darkly*, *Suffer the Little Children*, and most recently, *The Girl of His Dreams*.

*Also by Donna Leon*

Death at La Fenice  
Death in a Strange Country  
The Anonymous Venetian  
A Venetian Reckoning  
Acqua Alta  
The Death of Faith  
A Noble Radiance  
Fatal Remedies  
Friends in High Places  
A Sea of Troubles  
Wilful Behaviour  
Uniform Justice  
Doctored Evidence  
Through a Glass, Darkly  
Suffer the Little Children  
The Girl of His Dreams

# Blood from a Stone

Donna Leon



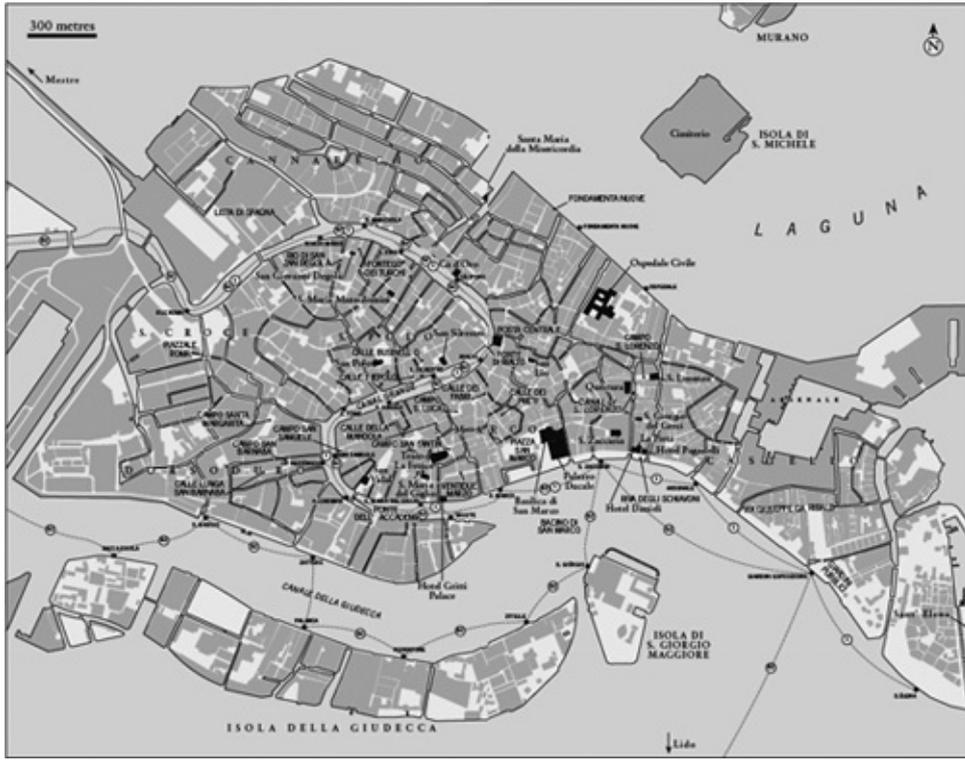
arrow books

*for Gesine Lübben*

*Weil ein Schwarzer hässlich ist.  
Ist mir denn kein Herz gegeben?  
Bin ich nicht von Fleisch und Blut?*

*Thus a Blackmoor is considered ugly.  
Didn't I receive a heart as well?  
Aren't I made of flesh and blood?*

—Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte*



# 1

TWO MEN PASSED under the wooden arch that led into Campo Santo Stefano, their bodies harlequined by the coloured Christmas lights suspended above them. Brighter light splashed from the stalls of the Christmas market, where vendors and producers from different regions of Italy tempted shoppers with their local specialities: dark-skinned cheeses and packages of paper-thin bread from Sardinia, olives in varying shape and colour from the entire length of the peninsula; oil and cheese from Tuscany; salami of all lengths, compositions, and diameters from Reggio Emilia. Occasionally one of the men behind the counters shouted out a brief hymn to the quality of his wares: 'Signori, taste this cheese and taste heaven'; 'It's late and I want to go to dinner: only nine Euros a kilo until they're gone'; 'Taste this pecorino, signori, best in the world'.

The two men passed the stalls, deaf to the blandishments of the merchants, blind to the pyramids of salami stacked on the counters on either side. Last-minute buyers, their number reduced by the cold, requested products they all suspected could be found at better prices and of more reliable quality at their local shops. But how better to celebrate the season than by taking advantage of shops that were open even on this Sunday, and how better to assert one's independence and character than by buying something unnecessary?

At the far end of the *campo*, beyond the last of the prefabricated wooden stalls, the men paused. The taller of them glanced at his watch, though they had both checked the time on the clock on the wall of the church. The official closing time, seven-thirty, had passed more than a quarter of an hour before, but it was unlikely that anyone would be out in this cold to check that the stalls ceased trading at the correct time. 'Allora?' the short one asked, glancing at his companion.

The taller man took off his gloves, folded them and put them in the left pocket of his overcoat, then jammed his hands into his pockets. The other did the same. Both of them wore hats, the tall one a dark grey Borsalino and the other a fur cap with ear flaps. Both had woollen scarves wrapped around their necks, and as they stepped beyond the circle of light from the last stand, they pulled them a bit higher, up around their ears, no strange thing to do in the face of the wind that came at them from the direction of the Grand Canal, just around the corner of the church of San Vidal.

The wind forced them to lower their faces as they started forward, shoulders hunched, hands kept warm in their pockets. Twenty metres from the last stall, on either side of the way, small groups of tall black men busied themselves spreading sheets on the ground, anchoring them at each corner with a woman's bag. As soon as the sheets were in place, they began to pull samples of various shapes and sizes from enormous sausage-shaped bags that sat on the ground all around them.

Here a Prada, there a Gucci, between them a Louis Vuitton: the bags huddled together in a promiscuity usually seen only in stores large enough to offer franchises to

all of the competing designers. Quickly, with the speed that comes of long experience, the men bent or knelt to place their wares on the sheets. Some arranged them in triangles; others preferred ordered rows of neatly aligned bags. One whimsically arranged his in a circle, but when he stepped back to inspect the result and saw the way an outsized dark brown Prada shoulder bag disturbed the general symmetry, he quickly re-formed them into straight lines, where the Prada could anchor their ranks from the back left corner.

Occasionally the black men spoke to one another, saying those things that men who work together say to pass the time: how one hadn't slept well the night before, how cold it was, how another hoped his son had passed the entrance exam for the private school, how much they missed their wives. When each was satisfied with the arrangement of his bags, he rose to his feet and moved back behind his sheet, usually to one corner or the other so that he could continue to talk to the man who worked next to him. Most of them were tall, and all of them were slender. What could be seen of their skin, their faces and their hands, was the glossy black of Africans whose ancestry had not been diluted by contact with whites. Whether moving or motionless, they exuded an atmosphere not only of good health but of good spirits, as if the idea of standing around in freezing temperatures, trying to sell counterfeit bags to tourists, was the greatest fun they could think of to have that evening.

Opposite them a small group was gathered around three buskers, two violinists and a cellist, who were playing a piece that sounded both baroque and out of tune. Because the musicians played with enthusiasm and were young, the small crowd that had gathered was pleased with them, and not a few of them stepped forward to drop coins into the violin case that lay open in front of the trio.

It was still early, probably too early for there to be much business, but the street vendors were always punctual and started work as soon as the shops closed. By ten minutes to eight, therefore, just as the two men approached, all of the Africans were standing behind their sheets, prepared for their first customers. They shifted from foot to foot, occasionally breathing on to their clasped hands in a futile attempt to warm them.

The two white men paused just at the end of the row of sheets, appearing to talk to one another, though neither spoke. They kept their heads lowered and their faces out of the wind, but now and then one of them raised his eyes to study the line of black men. The tall man placed his hand on the other's arm, pointed with his chin towards one of the Africans, and said something. As he spoke, a large group of elderly people wearing gym shoes and thick down parkas, a combination that made them look like wrinkled toddlers, flowed around the corner of the church and into the funnel created by the buskers on one side, the Africans on the other. The first few stopped, waiting for those behind to catch up, and when the group was again a unit, they started forward, laughing and talking, calling to one another to come and look at the bags. Without pushing or jostling, they assembled themselves three-deep in front of the line of Black men and their exposed wares.

The taller of the two men started towards the group of tourists, his companion following close behind. They halted on the same side as the church, careful to stand behind two elderly couples who were pointing at some of the bags and asking prices. At first the man whose sheet it was did not notice the two, since he was attending to

the questions of his potential customers. But suddenly he stopped talking and grew tense, like an animal scenting menace on the wind.

The black man at the next sheet, aware of his colleague's distraction, turned his attention to the tourists and decided instantly that he would have good luck with them. Their shoes told him to speak English, and he began: 'Gucci, Missoni, Armani, Trussardi. I have them all, ladies and gentlemen. Right from factory.' In the dimmer light here, his teeth glowed with Cheshire cat brilliance.

Three more of the tourist group insinuated their way past the two men to stand with their friends, all excitedly commenting on the bags, their attention now evenly divided between the items on both sheets. The taller man nodded, and as he did, both moved forward until they were standing just a half-step behind the Americans. Seeing them advance, the first trader pivoted on his right foot and started to arch himself away from the sheet, the tourists, and the two men. As he moved, the men took their right hands from their pockets with a smooth, practised ease that called no attention to itself. Each held a pistol, their barrels extended by tubular silencers. The taller of the two was the first to fire, though the only sound the gun made was a dull thwack, thwack, thwack, accompanied by two similar noises from the pistol of his companion. The buskers had worked their way towards the end of the allegro, and their music plus the shouts and squeals of the encircling crowd all but covered the sound of the shots, though the Africans to either side turned instantly towards them.

Momentum continued to carry the bag seller away from the people in front of his sheet; then gradually his motion slowed. The men, their guns now in their pockets, backed through the crowd of tourists, who politely moved out of their way. The men separated, one moving towards the Accademia bridge and the other towards Santo Stefano and Rialto. Quickly they disappeared among the people hurrying in both directions.

The bag seller cried out and threw one arm out in front of him. His body completed its half-circle, then sprawled to the ground beside his bags.

Like gazelles who panic and take flight at the first sign of danger, the other black men froze for an instant and then exploded with frightening energy. Four of them abandoned their wares and took off, running for the *calle* that led towards San Marco; two paused long enough to grab four or five bags in each hand, then disappeared over the bridge that led towards Campo San Samuele; the four remaining men left everything and fled towards the Grand Canal, where they alerted the men whose sheets were spread at the bottom of the bridge, over which they all ran, separating at the bottom and disappearing into the *calli* of Dorsoduro.

A white-haired woman was standing in front of the trader's sheet when he collapsed. When she saw him fall, she called out to her husband, who had been separated from her, and knelt beside the fallen man.

She saw the blood that seeped out from under him, staining the sheet red. Her husband, alarmed by her cry and her sudden sinking to the ground, pushed roughly through their friends and knelt beside her. He moved to put a protective arm around her shoulder, but then he saw the man on the sheet. He placed his hand at the man's throat, kept it there for long seconds, then removed it and got to his feet awkwardly, his knees reluctant with age. He bent and helped his wife to stand.

They looked around and saw only the people in their group, all gaping back and forth between each other's confused faces and the man who lay at their feet. On either side of the broad street extended the rows of outspread sheets, most still covered with neatly positioned bags. As the crowd in front of them turned away one by one, the buskers stopped playing.

It was another few minutes before the first Italian approached, and when he saw the black man, the sheet, and the blood, he pulled his *telefonino* from the pocket of his coat and dialled 113.

## 2

THE POLICE ARRIVED with a speed that astonished the Italian bystanders as much as it scandalized the Americans. To Venetians, half an hour did not seem a long time for the police to organize a boat and a squad of technicians and officers and reach Campo Santo Stefano, but by that time most of the Americans had drifted away in exasperation, telling one another that they would meet back at the hotel. No one bothered to keep an eye on the crime scene, so by the time the police finally did arrive, most of the bags had disappeared from the sheets, even from the one on which the body lay. Some of those who stole the dead man's bags left red footprints on his sheet; one set disappeared towards Rialto in a bloody trail.

The first officer on the scene, Alvisè, approached the small crowd that still stood near the dead man and ordered them to move back. He walked over to the man's body and stood, looking down at him as if confused as to what to do now that he could see the victim. Finally, a lab technician asked him to move aside while he set up a wooden stanchion, and then another, and then another until they ringed the sheet. From one of the boxes the technicians had brought to the scene he took a roll of red and white striped tape and ran it through slots in the tops of the wooden stanchions until a clear demarcation had been created between the body and the rest of the world.

Alvisè went over to a man who was standing by the steps of the church and demanded, 'Who are you?'

'Riccardo Lombardi,' the man answered. He was tall, about fifty, well-dressed, the sort of person who sat behind a desk and gave orders, or so thought Alvisè.

'What are you doing here?'

Surprised at the policeman's tone, the man answered, 'I was walking by, and I saw this crowd, so I stopped.'

'Did you see who did it?'

'Did what?'

It occurred to Alvisè only then that he had no idea what had been done, only that the Questura had received a call, saying that a black man was dead in Campo Santo Stefano. 'Can you show me some identification?' Alvisè demanded.

The man took out his wallet and extracted his *carta d'identità*. Silently, he handed it to Alvisè, who glanced at it before handing it back. 'Did you see anything?' he asked in the same voice.

'I told you, officer. I was walking by, and I saw these people standing around here, so I stopped to look. Nothing more.'

'All right. You can go,' Alvisè said in a tone that suggested the man really had no choice. Alvisè turned away from him and went back to the crime team, where the photographers were already packing up their equipment.

'Find anything?' he asked one of the technicians.

Santini, who was on his knees, running his gloved hands over the paving stones in search of shell casings, looked up at Alvise and said, 'A dead man,' before returning to his search.

Not deterred by the answer, Alvise pulled out a notebook from the inside pocket of his uniform parka. He flipped it open, took out a pen, and wrote 'Campo Santo Stefano'. He studied what he had written, glanced at his watch, added '20.58', capped the pen, and returned both notebook and pen to his pocket.

From his right, he heard a familiar voice ask, 'What's going on, Alvise?'

Alvise raised a languid hand in something that resembled a salute and said, 'I'm not sure, Commissario. We had a call, saying there was a dead man here, so we came over.'

His superior, Commissario Guido Brunetti, said, 'I can see that, Alvise. What happened to cause the man to be dead?'

'I don't know, sir. We're waiting for the doctor to get here.'

'Who's coming?' Brunetti asked.

'Who's coming where, sir?' Alvise asked, utterly at a loss.

'Which doctor is coming? Do you know?'

'I don't know, sir. I was in such a hurry to get the team here that I told them at the Questura to call and have one of the doctors sent.'

Brunetti's question was answered by the arrival of Dottor Ettore Rizzardi, *medico legale* of the city of Venice.

'Ciao, Guido,' Rizzardi said, shifting his bag to his left hand and offering his right. 'What have we got?'

'A dead man,' Brunetti said. 'I got the call at home, saying someone had been killed here, but nothing more than that. I just got here myself.'

'Better have a look, then,' Rizzardi said, turning towards the taped-off area. 'You speak to anyone?' he asked Brunetti.

'No. Nothing.' Talking to Alvise never counted.

Rizzardi bent and slipped under the tape, placing one hand on the pavement to do so, then held the tape up to make it easier for Brunetti to join him. The doctor turned to one of the technicians. 'You've taken pictures?'

'Sì, Dottore,' the man answered. 'From every side.'

'All right, then,' Rizzardi said, setting down his bag. He turned away, took out two pairs of thin plastic gloves and gave one pair to Brunetti. As they slipped them on, the doctor asked, 'Give me a hand?'

They knelt on either side of the dead man. All that was visible was the right side of his face and his hands. Brunetti was struck by the very blackness of the man's skin, then bemused by his own surprise: what other colour did he expect an African to be? Unlike the black Americans Brunetti had seen, with their shading from cocoa to copper, this man was the colour of ebony buffed to a high gloss.

Together, they reached under the body and turned the man on to his back. The intense cold had caused the blood to congeal. Their knees anchored the sheet, so when they moved him, his jacket stuck to the cloth and pulled away from both his body and the pavement with a sharp sucking sound. Hearing it, Rizzardi let the man's shoulder fall back on to the ground; Brunetti lowered his side, saying nothing.

Points of blood-stiffened cloth stood up on the man's chest, looking like the whorls a pastry chef's fantasy might create on a birthday cake.

'Sorry,' Rizzardi said, either to Brunetti or the dead man. Still kneeling, he bent over and used a gloved finger to touch each of the holes in his parka. 'Five of them,' he said. 'Looks like they really wanted to kill him.'

Brunetti saw that the dead man's eyes were open; so too was his mouth, frozen in the panic that must have filled him at the first shot. He was a handsome young man, his teeth gleaming in striking contrast to that burnished skin. Brunetti slipped one hand into the right-hand pocket of the man's parka, then the left. He found some small change and a used handkerchief. The inside pocket contained a pair of keys and a few Euro bills in small denominations. There was a *ricevuta fiscale* from a bar with a San Marco address, probably one of the bars in the *campo*. Nothing else.

'Who'd want to kill a *vu cumprà*?' Rizzardi asked, getting to his feet. 'As if the poor devils don't have enough as it is.' He studied the man on the ground. 'I can't tell, looking at him like this, where they got him, but three of the holes are grouped pretty near the heart. One would have been enough to kill him.' Stuffing his gloves into his pocket, Rizzardi asked, 'Professional, you think?'

'Looks like it to me,' Brunetti answered, aware that this made the death even more confusing. He had never had to trouble himself with the *vu cumprà* because few of them were ever involved in serious crime, and those few cases had always fallen to other commissarios. Like most of the police, indeed, like most residents, Brunetti had always assumed that the men from Senegal were under the control of organized crime, the reason most often offered to explain their politeness in dealing with the public: so long as their manner did not call attention to them, few people would trouble to ask how they so successfully managed to remain invisible to and undisturbed by the authorities. Brunetti had come over the years no longer to notice them nor to remember when they had displaced the original French-speaking Algerian and Moroccan *vu cumprà*.

Though there was an occasional round-up and examination of documents, the *vu cumprà* had never attracted sufficient official attention to become the subject of one of Vice-Questore Patta's 'crime alerts', which meant there had never been a serious attempt to address the patent illegality of their presence and their profession. They were left to ply their trade virtually untroubled by the forces of order, thus avoiding the bureaucratic nightmare that would surely result from any serious attempt to expel hundreds of undocumented aliens and return them to Senegal, the country from which most of them were believed to come.

Why then a killing like this, one that had the stamp of the professional all over it?

'How old do you think he was?' Brunetti asked for want of anything else to say.

'I don't know,' Rizzardi answered with a puzzled shake of his head. 'It's hard for me to tell with blacks, not until I get inside them, but I'd guess in his early thirties, maybe younger.'

'Do you have time?' Brunetti asked.

'Tomorrow afternoon, first thing. All right?'

Brunetti nodded.

Rizzardi leaned over and picked up his bag. Hefting it, he said, 'I don't know why I always bring this with me. It's not as if I'm ever going to have to use it to save

anyone.' He thought about this, shrugged, and said, 'Habit, I suppose.' He put out his hand, shook Brunetti's, and turned away.

Brunetti called to the technician who had taken the photos, 'When you get him to the hospital, would you take a couple of shots of his face from different angles and get them to me as soon as you've got them developed?'

'How many prints, sir?'

'A dozen of each.'

'Right. By tomorrow morning.'

Brunetti thanked him and waved over Alvis, who lurked just within earshot. 'Did anyone see what happened?' he asked.

'No, sir.'

'Who did you speak to?'

'A man,' Alvis answered, pointing in the direction of the church.

'What was his name?' Brunetti asked.

Alvis's eyes widened in surprise he could not disguise. After a pause so long that anyone else would have found it embarrassing, the officer finally said, 'I don't remember, sir.' At Brunetti's silence, he protested, 'He said he didn't see anything, Commissario, so I didn't need to take his name, did I?'

Brunetti turned to two white-coated attendants who were just arriving. 'You can take him to the Ospedale, Mauro,' he said. Then he added, 'Officer Alvis will go with you.'

Alvis opened his mouth to protest, but Brunetti forestalled him by saying, 'This way you can see if the hospital has admitted anyone with bullet wounds.' It was unlikely, given the apparent accuracy of the five shots that had killed the African, but at least it would free him of Alvis's presence.

'Of course, Commissario,' Alvis said, repeating his semi-salute. The officer watched as the two attendants stooped to pick up the body and place it on the stretcher, then led them back to their boat, walking purposefully, as though it was only through his intervention that they were sure of reaching it.

Turning, Brunetti called to a technician, who was now outside the taped circle, taking a close-up photo of the heel prints that led towards Rialto. 'Is Alvis the only one who came?'

'I think so, sir,' the man answered. 'Riverre was out on a domestic.'

'Has anyone tried to find out if there were any witnesses?' Brunetti asked.

The technician gave him a long look. 'Alvis?' was all he said before returning to his photos.

A group of teenagers stood against the wall of the garden. Brunetti approached them and asked, 'Did any of you see what happened here?'

'No, sir,' one of them said, 'we just got here now.'

Brunetti moved back to the cordoned area, where he saw three or four people. 'Were any of you here when it happened?' he asked.

Heads turned away, eyes glanced at the ground. 'Did you see anything at all?' he added, asking, not pleading.

A man at the back peeled himself away and started across the *campo*. Brunetti made no effort to stop him. As he stood there, the others dissolved until there was just one person left, an old woman who held herself upright only with the help of two canes.

He knew her by sight, though she was usually in the company of two mangy old dogs. She balanced her right cane against her hip and beckoned him towards her. As he approached, he saw the wrinkled face, the dark eyes, the white bristles on her chin.

‘Yes, Signora?’ he asked. ‘Did you see something?’ Without thinking, he addressed her in Veneziano rather than Italian.

‘There were some Americans here when it happened.’

‘How did you know they were Americans, Signora?’ he asked.

‘They had white shoes and they were very loud,’ she answered.

‘When it happened?’ he insisted. ‘Were you here? Did you see?’

She took her right cane and lifted it to point in the direction of the pharmacy on the corner, about twenty metres away. ‘No, I was over there. Just coming in. I saw them, the Americans. They were walking this way, from the bridge, and then they all stopped to look at the stuff the *vu cumprà* had.’

‘And you, Signora?’

She moved her cane a few millimetres to the left. ‘I went into the bar.’

‘How long were you in there, Signora?’

‘Long enough.’

‘Long enough for what?’ he asked, smiling at her, not at all annoyed by her oblique answer.

‘Barbara, the owner, after about eight, she takes all the *tramezzini* that haven’t been sold, and she cuts them up into little pieces and puts them on the counter. If you buy a drink, you can eat all you want.’

This surprised Brunetti, unaccustomed as he was to such generosity from the owners of bars; from the owners of anything, for that matter.

‘She’s a good girl, Barbara,’ the old woman said. ‘I knew her mother.’

‘So how long do you think you were in there, Signora?’ he asked.

‘Maybe half an hour,’ she answered, then explained, ‘It’s my dinner, you see. I go there every night.’

‘Good to know, Signora. I’ll remember that if I’m ever over here.’

‘You’re over here now,’ she said, and when he didn’t respond, she went on: ‘The Americans, they went in there. Well, two of them did,’ she added, lifting the cane again and pointing at the bar.

‘They’re in the back, having hot chocolate. You could probably talk to them if you wanted to,’ she said.

‘Thank you, Signora,’ he said and turned towards the bar.

‘The prosciutto and carciofi is the best,’ she called after him.

### 3

BRUNETTI HADN'T BEEN in the bar for years, ever since the brief period when it had been converted into an American ice-cream parlour and had begun to serve an ice-cream so rich it had caused him a serious bout of indigestion the one time he had eaten it. It had been, he recalled, like eating lard, though not the salty lard he remembered from his childhood, tossed in to give taste and substance to a pot of beans or lentil soup, but lard as lard would be if sugar and strawberries were added to it.

His fellow Venetians must have responded in similar fashion, for the place had changed ownership after a few years, but Brunetti had never been back. The tubs of ice-cream were gone now, and it had reverted to looking like an Italian bar. A number of people stood at the curved counter, talking animatedly and turning often to point out at the now-quiet *campo*; some sat at small tables that led into the back room. Three women stood behind the bar; one of them, seeing Brunetti enter, offered him a friendly smile. He walked towards the back and saw an elderly couple at the last table on the left. They had to be Americans. They might as well have been draped in the flag. White-haired, both of them, they gave the bizarre impression that they were dressed in each other's clothing. The woman wore a checked flannel shirt and a pair of thick woollen slacks, while the man wore a pink V-necked sweater, a pair of dark trousers, and white tennis shoes. Both apparently had their hair cut by the same hand. One could not say, exactly, that hers was longer: it was merely less short.

'Excuse me,' Brunetti said in English as he approached their table. 'Were you out in the *campo* earlier?'

'When the man was killed?' the woman asked.

'Yes,' Brunetti said.

The man pulled out a chair for Brunetti and, with old-fashioned courtesy, got to his feet and waited until Brunetti was seated. 'I'm Guido Brunetti, from the police,' he began. 'I'd like to talk to you about what you saw.'

Both of them had the faces of mariners: eyes narrowed in a perpetual squint, wrinkles seared into place by too much sun, and a sharpness of expression that even heavy seas would not disturb.

The man put out his hand, saying, 'I'm Fred Crowley, officer, and this is my wife, Martha.' When Brunetti released his hand, the woman stretched hers out, surprising him with the strength of her grip.

'We're from Maine,' she said. 'Biddeford Pool,' she specified, and then, as though that were not enough, added, 'It's on the coast.'

'How do you do,' Brunetti said, an old-fashioned phrase he had forgotten he knew. 'Could you tell me what you saw, Mr and Mrs Crowley?' How strange this was, he the impatient Italian and these the Americans who needed to go through the slow ritual of courtesy before getting down to the matter at hand.

'Doctors,' she corrected.