

## PROLOGUE

It was a little before midnight on Saint Benedict's Day, 1607. A thick layer of stratus cloud dimmed and diffused the faint light of a crescent moon. A horse harnessed to a cart was grazing on the verge in a side street. The cart was illuminated by flickering light emerging from an open door at the side of the twelfth-century church of Santa Giustina, in the picturesque town of Monselice, south of Padua. Two men stood warming their hands around the fire in the apse. Their faces glowed red in the firelight.

'When the fat burns, it really gets going, doesn't it, Roti?'

'Yes, master.'

'If the next priest is as fat as this one, I don't think we'll need to waste as much brandy getting it going, do you?'

'No, master.'

'What are you doing?'

'The silver-jewelled crucifix. No point leaving it, master. If I can get near enough and hook it off him with this shovel, I think I can reach it. I forgot to take it off him, in all the excitement.'

'Watch out, you oaf! You've messed up the earth bund I made. Forget the crucifix and use your shovel to put the bund back as it was. Be quick about it, we mustn't linger, satisfying as it is.'



Verona

Mosta

Padua

Milano

Venice

Este

Monselice

Rovigo

Ferrara

Bologna

Vado

Gastiglione

San Pellegrino

Spedaletto

Pistoia

Barbino

Florence

Arezzo

Sienna

Perugia

Orvieto

Terni

Viterbo

Orte

Sutri

Fiano Romano

Bracciano

Rome

Frascati

Naples

# PART ONE

## CHAPTER ONE

**H**e went in and closed the door behind him. His uncle did not look up from his writing, but signalled with his left hand that the visitor should sit in the chair in front of his large desk. Pietro sat and while his uncle continued to write, he looked around the room. Two works of Giorgio Vasari graced the wall to his left. The nearest, *The Entombment*, depicted the disciples carrying the lifeless Christ to his tomb. It was a dark work, beautifully executed, but with a minimum of colour. Pietro much preferred the further painting, *The Garden of Gethsemane*. There was more colour. He was attracted to the vibrant red, yellow and gold robes of the two male disciples, asleep in the foreground. Their slumbering bodies formed a vee shape, within which Mary Magdalene also slept, her head resting on her left hand. Above Mary, Christ was praying, his arms outstretched. A winged-cherub held out a gold chalice towards him. Christ was adorned in red and blue,

exquisitely detailed folds of cloth. He found something about the vee shape, framing Mary, exciting. There was only one work on the wall to his right, Salome with the Head of John the Baptist, by Titian. His attention was drawn back to the desk as his uncle signed the paper with a flourish, and then put down his quill. He focussed on the paper, as his uncle looked up, but his uncle then turned the paper, and pressed it against the leather-bound blotting pad, leaving it there upside-down.

‘Pietro, thank you for coming to visit me. How is my favourite nephew?’ He felt his uncle’s hazel eyes drilling into his own.

‘I am very well, Uncle, and hope that I can be of service.’

‘His Holiness, Pope Innocent, is an old and frail man. It is possible that, before long, I may take his place. I have been giving it much thought.’

‘Uncle Ippolito, if I can be of any service to you, it would be my honour.’

‘God tells me you will be of very great service. I am considering making you and Cinzio cardinals, if I am elected, of course. It will comfort me to know I have the loyalty of my nephews.’

‘Speaking for myself, you will forever have my loyalty, Uncle. I’m sure that Cinzio will feel the same.’ He took another fleeting glance towards the Garden of Gethsemane. ‘If they elect you, Uncle, will you appoint a new Secretary of State?’

‘Yes, Pietro. I welcome your thoughts concerning Cinzio. I also expect he will be loyal, but to hear it from you is doubly reassuring. As he is the eldest, it seems only right. I hope you are not disappointed.’

‘Of course not, Uncle, but is age everything? As your brother’s son, I bear the Aldobrandini name, while, as your sister’s son, Cinzio does not.’

‘What’s in a name? To those distant from Rome, it would look less like nepotism, if I appointed Cinzio to such an important position. I am concerned to be seen to be doing the right thing. We rely so heavily on Spain, their power and their gold.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better, Uncle, if we did not have to rely on Spain? What about the Venetians and the Genoese, Uncle? Are they not rich and powerful too?’

‘You are right, Pietro, but the Venetian strength makes them rebellious. They launch two or three new ships a week, I have been told, but they are our bastion against the Ottomans. The Genoese dance with Spain. Their banks support Philip, and their ships toil for him in the Americas. The Genoese will not cause us much trouble. France would be a glorious prize. I have heard that Henry has found a new mistress, a Catholic, I am told.’

‘I could make some investigations for you. I understand that her name is Gabrielle d’Estrées, Uncle. Perhaps I could influence her to convert Henry to the faith. It is presently only English money and German troops that keep Henry in power. His reign is precarious, is it not, Uncle?’

‘I may have underestimated you, Pietro. I like your train of thought. It would be reassuring to be less reliant on Spain. In the meantime, however, there is something that we must do for them. You may be able to help.’

‘What is it, Uncle Ippolito?’

‘There is a man they call the memory man. He is from

Naples. His name is Giordano Bruno. At present, I understand, he is in Frankfurt. The Spanish want him dead, but he knows people, important people, and he can perform incredible feats of memory. They say that he can memorise entire books of the bible. Someone with his contacts, and his memory, would be a valuable resource. I would like you to make a plan. Find some way of enticing him to one of the papal states, where we can have him arrested.'

'What would we arrest him for?'

'He has written several books. They will be in the papal library. If he has written a book, he is almost certain to have committed heresy. You just have to look hard enough.'

'I shall start researching him at once, Uncle. If the Spanish want him dead, I wonder how much they are prepared to pay.'

'I expect that the price will increase, once we have him, and start teasing his knowledge from him.'

'I will begin work on him at once, Uncle. There is another project I have been working on, a lady of interest, Lucrezia d'Este. She is a great patron of the arts, a kindred spirit if you like. She entered into an affair with Count Ercole Contrari, captain of the ducal guard. Her brother, Duke Alfonso, had the count and his sister taken to his palace in Ferrara, and had the count strangled in front of her. She hates her family with a vengeance, Uncle. It is possible that, with her help, we could bring Este within the realm of the papal states.'

'Very good, Pietro, I am more and more certain that I have now chosen the right nephew.'



One year later, on the third of February 1592, Pietro Aldobrandini visited his uncle to kiss his ring.

‘Your Holiness, I devote myself anew to your service. The cardinals have made a wise choice.’

‘With your help and guidance, they have, Pietro. You shall join their ranks as soon as it is seemly for me to install my nephews.’

‘Thank you, Your Holiness. I am intrigued to know why you chose the name Clement for your papacy.’

‘Clement the seventh was ambitious, and a great art lover. It was he who commissioned Da Vinci to paint *The Last Supper*, you know. It just appealed to me. Tell me, how does the business go with the memory man?’

‘I have been befriending several Venetians, Your Holiness. Some are less rebellious than others, and I have found a man who envies my art collection, a man named Giovanni Mocenigo. Last year, he went to the Frankfurt fair and met the memory man. Mocenigo seems to have fallen under his spell and wants to learn his memory tricks. He has invited him to Venice.’

‘Will he go?’

‘He covets the chair in mathematics at the University of Padua.’

‘It might be embarrassing to arrest a Professor of Padua University; the liberal intellectuals wouldn’t like it.’

‘There is no need to be concerned. I have made arrangements for another fellow to get it, Galileo Galilei.’

‘I haven’t heard of him, is he biddable?’

‘He should be. His father was an impoverished musician, and he has illegitimate daughters.’



‘Good, so you should encourage this Mocenigo to lure the memory man to Venice. Will the Venetians give him up to us?’

‘From what I have heard, the fellow will soon wear out his welcome. Mocenigo covets one of my paintings by Caravaggio, I will miss it, but I will do it for you, Uncle, Your Holiness.’

‘You will be rewarded, Pietro. I trust you have found suitable crimes to charge him with.’

‘You were quite right, Your Holiness, blasphemies riddle his books. He says that every star in the sky is like earth and inhabited.’



‘How pleasant to see you again, so soon, Pietro, forgive me, Cardinal Aldobrandini. You bring news perhaps?’

‘Yes, Your Holiness, Gabrielle d’Estrées has been successful. Henry wishes to embrace the faith again. He renounces Protestantism.’

‘Excellent, make the arrangements. What wonderful news! We shall have an additional, powerful revenue stream, and be less dependent on Spain. He remains without an heir, though. His wife Margaret de Valois retired to the Auvergne, I believe.’

‘That is so, Your Holiness. He does, however, have children by his many mistresses. He wishes to have his marriage annulled, and marry Gabrielle.’

‘Good, it is not a problem for me.’

‘His councillors are against it, and, forgive me, Your Holiness, but it would not go down well with the other cardinals.’

‘Meddling, ungrateful, pious bastards. Can’t they appreciate how hard I work for Rome?’

‘Perhaps I should see if I can find a suitable wife for him, Your Holiness, one who would serve our purposes.’

‘Yes, yes, good idea, Pietro.’

‘There is something else, Your Holiness. I have been receiving letters from an Englishman, Joseph Creswell, a Jesuit and friend of Robert Persons. Creswell was chaplain to the Duke of Parma’s army in Flanders. It concerns the English problem. King Philip has had visitors from Scotland, Hugh Barclay and John Cecil, seeking support. They are agents of the Earls of Erroll, Huntley, and Angus. They say it would be a most dangerous thing to support James the sixth. He is Protestant to the core. If we wish to convert the kingdoms of Scotland and England, then we should lend our support to them, rather than James.’

‘England would be a magnificent prize. Keep me informed.’

‘Creswell has also been in touch with Robert Bellarmine.’

‘Bellarmine, what is his involvement in this?’

‘It is supportive, Your Holiness, and we should keep it that way. He has written the definitive book on God’s grace, as I’m sure you know. With his help, should you wish to depose a king, it could be because he had acted against God’s grace.’



In December 1595, Cardinal Aldobrandini once again visited his uncle, Pope Clement the Eighth in the Quirinal Palace, Rome.

‘Your Holiness, I have had further interesting

communication from Creswell. He argues convincingly that in order to establish the Catholic faith in England again, an English, Catholic king is necessary. Unfortunately, the only possibility seems to be to convert King James of Scotland. Yet he is a wild heretic and could upset the political equilibrium of Europe. He also points out that it is dangerous to appoint one king for the entire island. To everybody its soul, and to every ship its pilot.’

‘Yes, he has a point. We must bide our time, yet seize the opportunity when it arises.’



On the eighth of May 1598, a procession passed through the great gate, the Porta di San Giorgio, in Ferrara. There were eight hundred men in the procession, and the entire population of the city lined the streets. Provision-laden mules led the cavalcade. They were followed by five mounted officers, ahead of five hundred mounted musketeers and lancers. Behind them rode a long train of pontifical officials and foreign diplomats. Struggling to keep up, four men carried an effigy of Christ under a ceremonial silver canopy. Close behind the swaying effigy of Christ came a column of twenty-seven cardinals, on foot, with three magistrates. The pope’s treasurer rode behind the magistrates, tossing specially minted coins into the crowd. The coins commemorated the glorious return to papal rule of the city. Behind him came Pope Clement the Eighth, carried in a sedan chair with eight porters and covered by a canopy of gold cloth. At the rear, Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini followed in a coach.



On Friday, the fifteenth of February 1600, Cardinal Aldobrandini visited his uncle again.

‘Thank you for your report of the trial, Pietro. I agree, I think we have got everything from Bruno, the memory man, that we are going to get. Bellarmine agrees, as does Borghese. Have the Spaniards raised their offer at all?’

‘No, Your Holiness. Twenty thousand ducats is all they are prepared to pay for his execution.’

‘Well, it’s better than nothing, and we should move on. You must have him handed over to the civil authorities for the execution.’

‘Yes, Your Holiness.’



In November 1603, Pietro Aldobrandini was summoned to see his uncle again.

‘Pietro, you will be proud of me. I put on my best papal persona, and the Englishman bought it hook, line and sinker. I offered to hear his confession, and he told me everything. If he survives the mission we have sent him on, he could be useful to us again.’

‘Useful, in what way, Your Holiness?’

‘Well, he is more intelligent than he appears. He speaks a multitude of languages, like a native. He is a ferocious and formidable fighter, and he can open any lock without a key. He is also an expert in breaking ciphers. He was taught everything, apart from languages, by the English secret service. He was their best spy, yet he has remained a Catholic. If he survives his mission, I am quite certain he will return to Florence. There is a woman he has fallen in love with, called Francesca. They already have illegitimate children. He won’t be able to stay in Florence

since he knows that the duke poisoned his brother to take the crown. Keep your eyes out for him. He will either collect his family and take them back to England, or he will come to Rome.’

‘I will make it a priority, Your Holiness.