

CHAPTER ONE

1567, Paris

Don Francés opened his study door and called for Captain Rodriguez. In less than a minute, he heard the familiar steps of Rodriguez rushing up the stairs. In contrast to his normal practice, Don Francés held the door open for his captain.

‘Your Excellency.’

‘It is intolerable! They have gone too far this time.’

‘You have interrogated your secretary I take it, Your Excellency?’

‘Yes, this Venetian spy has offered him money. He was using Ramón to get at our correspondence. Ramón told me everything as soon as I confronted him. I have some pity for Ramón. His son is unwell and he cannot afford a doctor, thanks to the tightness of His Majesty’s purse strings. But we must show the doge that he has overstepped the mark. I cannot let him get away with this.’

‘What shall I do, Your Excellency?’

‘The Venetian spy. You must make an example of him. See how many of his bones you can break without actually killing him. Then leave him on the Venetian ambassador’s doorstep. That should be clear enough.’

‘It will be a pleasure, Your Excellency. My men have had no entertainment for quite a while. Would you like me to dispose of Ramón as well?’

‘Ramón? No, I have had my physician attend to his son. I think I can be quite certain of his loyalty now. And

it takes so very much time to train a new secretary.'



The flames were biting into Anthony's flesh as he struggled against the ropes that bound his limbs firmly to the stake. He could smell the roasting flesh and hear his screams, like the screams he had heard in Smithfield. He glanced across to see flames licking upwards around Marie's thighs, reaching, feeling higher and higher, her soft, pale skin burning, crisping, crackling. His eyes followed the flames upwards as the fabric of her dress burnt away. His agony danced with ecstasy for a moment, then he lifted his gaze to her face, which smiled before dissolving into a jawbone, teeth and skull, then transforming into another smiling face, that of the lovely Donna, wife of Fabris, his fencing master from Hampton Court.

A bright light swept everything from his sight and a deep voice called. He must have crossed. It hadn't been as bad as he had feared.

'Who is your master?'

'You are, lord, you are my only master.'

'I am not your master. We have never met. Who is your master?' A test, of course. He had felt the flames of hell, and now he saw the light. He would not deny his god.

'You are my only master, lord.' He hoped Marie would make it through too, and Donna. He tried to reach out to hold her hand, but could not move his wrists. 'You are the one true master, lord.'



Who am I? Who is Marie? Why was I at Smithfield, and

who was being burnt? Hampton Court, I see a man. He scolds me, but with love in his eyes. He wants me to read law, but it's not for me. Father, is that you? His father's mouth opens. He can see him mouth 'yes'. Who am I, Father? His father's mouth opens and closes, but no sound emerges. Where am I? Why can't I move? The mist is thick on the water, the lookout at the bow peering ahead. The oarsmen pull steadily. We glide through still water. A shadowy shape rises to our right. A bell tolls, twice. There is a bump. The oarsmen ship their oars and one of them leaps onto the quay with a warp. As they tie the boat up alongside, the mist clears. I'm in Paris, that's where I am. What am I doing here?



Anthony paid the boatman and climbed onto the jetty. He slung the strap of the small sack holding his spare shirt and hosen over his head. Then he pulled the hand-drawn map from the purse tied to his belt and studied it. The towering spire of Notre Dame on the island in the river gave him his first landmark. Turning around, he saw the turrets of an enormous palace, the Louvre, just as shown on the map. Orientated, he set off towards it. His right hand went to his neck, and he clasped the Saint Christopher medallion that his mother had given him on his seventeenth birthday, just before he set off for Scotland two years ago. She said it would keep him safe on his travels. As he made his way through a market, he listened to the cacophony of conversations. There were accents very different to the French he had learnt from the diplomats' children he had played with in his youth. He mouthed the familiar words with strange accents and guessed at the meanings of the probably vulgar words in

common use. He passed a man and boy. The man was chastising the boy for neglecting his school work. Anthony felt for his St. Christopher again, winced, and moved on, turning right when he identified the Rue des Deus. He marvelled at the elaborately decorated stone buildings, then paused as a herd of sheep passed. Then he crossed the street and turned left into Rue St. Honore. Here he found the English Embassy, at number 26. He knocked on the massive oak door, which was soon answered by a manservant who spoke reasonable French, although his accent betrayed him as English. Anthony presented the manservant with the document that Sir Nicholas had given him, addressed to Sir Henry Norris. The manservant led him into a reception room.

‘Please take a seat,’ the manservant said, and departed. It was an impressive room; the painted plaster walls were hung with several portraits. Dominating the wall opposite was a portrait of Queen Elizabeth. To the right of the queen, stretched a series of smaller portraits. Since the last but one in the row was of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, he assumed that the very last one must be of Sir Henry Norris, the current incumbent as England’s ambassador to France. The manservant reappeared and beckoned him towards a door which led into a smaller room, where his assumption was confirmed. Glancing up from reading the letter, Sir Henry motioned him to sit. He sat facing the ambassador across a large desk. After some minutes, Sir Henry placed the letter on the desk and looked up.

‘So you are Sir Anthony Standen. Welcome to our embassy in Paris.’ Sir Henry stood so Anthony stood too

and they shook hands.

‘Thank you, Sir Henry,’ said Anthony as they both sat down again.

‘First, may I enquire how you met Sir Nicholas, my predecessor here?’

‘I met him in Edinburgh, sir. I was engaged as master of horse by Lord Darnley and travelled there with him when he was to marry Mary Queen of Scots. Sir Nicholas, as I’m sure you know, sir, was Queen Elizabeth’s envoy to Scotland, sent with the aim of trying to prevent the marriage to Lord Darnley. I met him a second time, quite by chance. He had with him a protégé, Francis Walsingham.’

‘From what I know of Francis Walsingham, very little is left to chance. Where did you meet him?’

‘It was just after Lord Darnley was killed. I was left without a position, making a small living by doing some language teaching. I was having lunch in the Sheep Heid Tavern when they came in and Sir Nicholas recognised me. He had travelled to Scotland to secure the release of Queen Mary following her arrest by the Scottish lords. It seemed to be a very fortunate chance encounter to me, sir. I was down on my luck, scraping a living and unwelcome in my homeland. Now, here I am in Paris with, I hope, sir, a chance to redeem myself.’

‘How did you secure the position with Lord Darnley?’

‘My father is a lawyer and works in Hampton Court Palace. We lived in East Molesey nearby. My mother knew Lady Margaret Lennox, Lord Darnley’s mother, and suggested me for the role.’

‘So your father is a lawyer. Where did he train?’

‘At Gray’s Inn, sir.’

‘Gray’s Inn. I have a lot of friends at Gray’s. Did you ever go there with your father?’

‘Only once, Sir Henry, when I was ten. While my father was in meetings, I went for a walk to see the market at Smithfield. There was a huge and noisy crowd, and I wanted to see what was going on. When I worked my way to the front, I found they were just starting to burn men and women. I discovered later they were the Islington Martyrs. The screams and the smell still haunt me. I never went back, sir.’

‘That was an unfortunate experience for a boy of ten, very unfortunate,’ Sir Henry repeated, deep in thought. ‘Why didn’t you follow your father into a career in law?’

‘My father wanted me to. He tried to teach me about law, but I’m afraid very little of it made any sense to me. I preferred languages, art and fencing, I seemed to have a natural talent for them. My younger brother, who is also Anthony, although we call him Freddy to avoid confusion, and my youngest brother Edmund, are both following father into law. I’m afraid I was rather a disappointment to him.’

‘What ambitions do you have now, what is it that drives you?’

‘I want to serve my queen and country, Sir Henry.’

‘Yes, yes, we all do. That’s what you think you should say. What is it you want to achieve?’

‘Just the usual things, Sir Henry, to see the world, seeking fame and fortune. I suppose I want to show my father that I can make a success of things, my way.’

‘I can understand that. If you can help us, then I think you may well see quite a lot of the world. Your fortune, however, is likely to be quite modest. Her Majesty is very careful with her purse strings. Fame is certainly not appropriate for the work we have in mind. Sir Nicholas thinks you may be of use to us since you know many of the officials, messengers and visitors to the Scottish court. You also speak many languages fluently, I understand.’

‘Yes, sir, as a child I played with the children of the diplomats who came to Hampton Court. I found I have a gift for languages, I’m a mimic for accents. Having some natural ability for languages, I found I enjoyed them at school. My language teachers praised me, and I worked harder and harder. I found that learning the grammar of Latin and Greek helped me learn other languages, and as I felt I was achieving something, I redoubled my efforts. But other masters, my history master, for example, said I was sinfully self indulgent to only work at the subjects I enjoyed. He was a friend of my father, and I think my father agreed with him.’

‘Yes I see. Your languages will be of much more use to us now than ancient history, but modern history you will need to learn.’

‘Very well, but I’m still uncertain what you have in mind for me.’

‘The Scottish lords are still holding Queen Mary prisoner. They also hold the child, Prince James. Queen Elizabeth is trying to secure their release and the reinstatement of Mary. Scotland is in absolute turmoil. After Mary married Earl Bothwell, the leading suspect in the murder of your former employer Darnley, the lords

divided. Bothwell fled to Norway, and then to Denmark, where he is now imprisoned. The French want to get hold of the young prince so that they can further French influence in Scotland. The Spanish are desperate to stop them. It's an absolute powder keg.' Sir Henry paused.

'I understand that Queen Mary, and, in turn, Prince James, are the Catholic favourites to succeed Queen Elizabeth in England. So why should France and Spain, both Catholic countries, be at odds over it?'

'France is only partly Catholic. Most of the south is under Huguenot control, the north is Catholic and the centre is hotly disputed. Spain could rightly fear that France might fall to the protestant Huguenots. If that were to happen, then Spain would be cut off from its dominion in the Low Countries by both land and sea.' As Sir Henry paused, Anthony nodded.

'So how can I help?' Anthony asked.

'By keeping your eyes and ears open. When you spot anyone you know from the Scottish court, you will follow them. I want to know who they visit, and if possible, what they have to say. When they visit a tavern, see if you can keep in earshot. Report back to me as soon as you have something.'

'What if they recognise me?' asked Anthony.

'We must make sure they don't. My man Robert will help you with dyeing your hair and beard. That will be a start. Then we shall establish an alternative identity for you, a merchant of some sort. Wine, cloth, whatever interests you the most. Then I suggest making you an Italian with passable French but poor English. We'll find you lodgings somewhere nearby. Both the Scottish and

Spanish embassies are just around the corner from here. How does that sound?’

‘It sounds rather exciting, but there’s just one thing,’ said Anthony.

‘What is it?’

‘What shall I use for money?’ Sir Henry smiled.

‘That will be taken care of. A salary of ten crowns a month, plus approved expenses.’

‘And what are approved expenses?’

‘When you have exceptional expenditure to loosen a tongue, either through wine or monetary inducement, that will be reimbursed depending on the value of the information obtained.’

‘I see,’ said Anthony.

‘Good,’ Sir Henry said as he stood up. ‘Now come along and Robert will get you started. There is one other thing. When did you receive your knighthood? I try to keep tabs on who’s who. One has to, you know. And I don’t remember you.’

‘I saved Queen Mary’s life when Lord Darnley, his uncle and the others assassinated her secretary, David Rizzio. Queen Mary knighted me for that.’

‘Ah, I see. Not an English knight then, Standen.’



Sir Henry’s servant Robert Clark dyed Anthony’s hair and beard black, then trimmed both. Anthony inspected his reflection in the mirror he was offered, and was surprised at the difference it made. The change from his natural brown hair made him look every bit the Italian wine merchant they had decided he was to become. Robert had also got a change of clothes, knitted woollen hose, fine

linen shirts, coloured waistcoats and doublets in the Venetian style. Robert had quite an expert eye, and they fitted perfectly. Robert then took him to a house on Rue Des Augustines, where Madam Dufour had a room for him. Robert explained that Madam Dufour had been on the embassy's payroll for many years and was trustworthy.

Next, they went to a wine merchant just off Rue St. Honore, and Robert introduced him to Monsieur Lavigne as Antonio Foscari. Once again, Robert explained that Monsieur Lavigne had been a supplier to the embassy for many years. Anthony was to spend a month or two working with Lavigne full time, developing his cover as an Italian wine merchant working on a trading relationship with Paris in fine wines and spirits. After that, he would spend most of his time looking for Scottish messengers and spending half a day a week maintaining the cover story.

He rather enjoyed learning about wine. He found that corrupting his French with a Venetian accent was a challenge, but it became easier after the wine tastings. Monsieur Lavigne introduced him to the local grape varieties, particularly the exceptional Ay wines of Marne and the Beaune wines of Burgundy.

'Now try this wine, Antonio, and tell me what you think.' He took the goblet and swirled the wine, breathing in the aroma as Monsieur Lavigne had taught him. He took a sip and ran it around his mouth.

'It is, how do you say, tasting of strawberries,' said Anthony.

'Excellent, you learn quickly. What else?'

‘Slightly spicy?’

‘Very good. This is the Sangiovese grape, otherwise known as the blood of Jupiter. It is one of the finest Italian grapes and one that is the foundation of the best Italian wines. You will need to know this grape well if you are to be an Italian wine merchant.’

Throughout the rest of the summer, Anthony worked on his new persona and visited all the taverns near the Louvre. This was the palace where Charles IX held court with his mother, Catherine de Medici, when in Paris, and around which all the significant embassies were located. He even sold some wine, which rather surprised Monsieur Lavigne. Using his fake Italianesque French, he tried engaging tavern customers in conversation. Usually they were polite, but restrained. There had been very little diplomatic activity, but Sir Henry had explained that King Charles and his court were in the country for the summer, near Meaux, a day’s ride east of Paris. Anthony gradually discovered that people opened up to him far more readily when he volunteered some revelation about himself. His first success was when he invented a girlfriend back in Venice and wrote himself a letter breaking off their relationship in favour of a fencing instructor. He found many people ready to console his sorrow and recount their own tales of treacherous wives and paramours. When he moaned about his parsimonious boss, who was always late paying his wages, he found himself in good company.

At the end of September the king and his mother returned to the city, and the rumour spread that Louis, Prince de Condé, leader of the Huguenots, had tried to

seize Charles, Catherine and the rest of the royal family, using as his excuse a supposed Italian plot to capture the king. Days later, news arrived of a massacre of Catholic priests in Nîmes. Anthony found his cover as an Italian a little difficult for a while and lay low.

After a few weeks he ventured out again, and it was on a sunny morning, as he approached the English embassy, that he passed a figure he recognised as John Beaton, the brother of James Beaton, Mary's ambassador in Paris. Beaton didn't give him a second glance. When Anthony got to the next junction, he turned left and stopped, then peered back around the corner to see Beaton still walking down the street. Anthony followed him. He watched Beaton enter a grand, three-storey house on Rue St. Thomas, then he strolled past, looking through the ground-floor window, where he saw Beaton being offered a seat by a tall, smartly dressed man in his mid-thirties. Anthony continued down the street for fifty yards, then crossed the street and stood by a tree from where he had an unobstructed view of the house.



From his third-floor office on Rue St. Thomas, Don Francés de Alava, the Spanish ambassador to France, gazed out of the window at the busy street below. There was a knock on his door.

'Come in.'

'Your Excellency, there is a Mr John Beaton here to see you, a messenger of the Queen of Scots.'

'Thank you, Rodriguez. I saw him from the window. He has been followed. Here, see for yourself.' Captain Rodriguez joined his master at the window. 'There, see

the athletic-looking young man across the street? Black hair and beard.'

'Yes, I see him, Your Excellency. Shall I arrest him?' asked Rodriguez.

'No, but follow him. Find out who he is and who he's working for. And show Mr Beaton up.'

'Yes, Your Excellency,' Rodriguez bowed and closed the ambassador's door behind him.



What do I do now? Anthony thought. I suppose when Beaton leaves, I should follow him and see where he goes next. But if someone else leaves before that, do I follow them instead? This is clearly where Beaton was sent, so it must be the key link. I need to find out what is being said in there. Sir Henry needs something of value, if I am to make much from it. He had made that clear. The front door opening again and John Beaton leaving interrupted his thoughts. Anthony let him get almost to the corner of the street before setting off after him. He quickened his pace as Beaton reached the corner opposite the city wall. Anthony didn't notice Captain Rodriguez and two other men slip out of de Alava's house and spread out before following him. Beaton returned to his brother's house, the Scottish ambassador's residence, and Anthony took a seat outside the Champs des Oiseaux tavern and watched the Beaton house. He bought a pitcher of ale from the innkeeper and considered what his next move should be. The innkeeper moved on to take the order of another new arrival, who had taken a table behind him. As the shadows grew longer and his pitcher grew emptier, Anthony decided that nothing else was likely to happen at

the Beaton house that night. What he needed to do was find out what had sent Beaton to the house on Rue St. Thomas, and what message he had delivered. Best to sleep on it, he thought as he got up and left the tavern, oblivious of the man from the table behind him rising a few seconds later.



For the next few days, Anthony went about his work for Monsieur Lavigne, concentrating on selling wines and making deliveries to taverns and large houses in the Louvre area. He regularly passed the house on Rue St. Thomas that Beaton had visited. Anthony hoped to see him again, but didn't. He did, however, occasionally notice people entering or leaving the building and studied them carefully, committing them to memory. He had to find out more about the household. But of course, how could he be so stupid? It was a large household, very much larger, in fact than many of the houses he had called on to sell wine to. He would make a call and see what he could find out.



‘What have you learnt, Captain Rodriguez?’ asked Don Francés de Alava.

‘He is a Venetian wine merchant, working for a local firm, Lavigne’s, just off Rue St. Honore. He has lodgings near there, on Rue Des Augustines. He has made it his business to sell wine mainly in this area and around the Beaton house.’

‘Venetian, you say, one of the Doge’s spies, then. They are everywhere. If we had a hundredth of their espionage budget, there is nothing we would not know.’

The floorboards creaked as Don Francés de Alava paced the length of his study under the gaze of King Philip's portrait above the fireplace. 'Has he visited the Venetian embassy?'

'No, Your Excellency. He has kept his cover. We have not observed him pass any messages to anyone. I have men keeping a discrete watch on him, Monsieur Lavigne and his landlady. None of them have given us any cause for suspicion.'

'Have you questioned any of them? Do you have a name for our mysterious Venetian?'

'No, Your Excellency, I thought it best we should not show our hand yet. I am certain that he does not know he is being followed.'

'Good, good. Let us keep up the surveillance for now.'

'Perhaps if I could have a few more men, Your Excellency. At present we cannot follow both him and his associates.'

'If His Majesty were a little less careful with his purse, then you would have your men, captain. As it is you must do the best you can. You may go. Oh, and send Ramón up would you.' Captain Rodriguez bowed and left the study.

The captain's footsteps receded down the corridor and Don Francés crossed the room to his large walnut desk and sat down. He unlocked a desk drawer and withdrew some papers. As he leafed through them, there was a knock on the door. Don Francés grunted, and the door opened. A short, plainly dressed man of about forty entered. Without glancing up, Don Francés waved his

hand towards the seat in front of the desk. The man crossed the room towards it but remained standing.

‘Your Excellency, I wonder if I could trouble you. My son is very sick.’ Don Francés looked up from his papers and noticed the fear etched in his secretary’s face.

‘I am very sorry to hear that, Ramón. Has he seen a doctor?’

‘We cannot afford a doctor, Your Excellency. I don’t like to mention it, but it is three months now since I last received my salary, and, well...’

‘Ramón, you know as well as I do how many urgent requests for funds we have dispatched to the king, with nothing yet to show for them. I am doing the best I can with my own resources, but they are limited. I am sure the king will send funding soon, and then you shall have the money we owe you. In the meantime, you have work to do. There are some letters from the Queen of Scots that I would like you to decipher.’

‘Thank you, Your Excellency, of course.’



Anthony put down his basket of wine flagons and knocked on the heavy oak door of the house on Rue St. Thomas. After about a minute, he heard footsteps and the door opened. A young man in a smart but cheap looking tunic over woollen hose looked him up and down.

‘What do you want?’ asked the young man in accented French. Anthony thought it sounded like a Spanish accent.

‘I am a wine merchant with some samples that I’m sure your master would like. Is he in?’

‘His excellency is not to be disturbed.’

‘Well, is there anyone in authority who could sample these fine wines? They are of resounding quality at exceptionally low prices.’ The young man looked dubious and began to close the door. ‘Hey, I shouldn’t want to be in your shoes when his excellency discovers you have turned away the finest wines in Christendom. I shall be back, and the prices will not be as low as they are today.’

‘I don’t know. His excellency’s secretary is in, but he is working.’

‘I’m sure he will welcome a sample of fine wine, then. Would you ask him please?’ Somewhat reluctantly, the young man opened the door, and Anthony stepped into the hallway. He looked around as the young man closed the door behind him. The ceiling was high and elaborately decorated. A wide staircase lay to the left, half-way down the hall, and there were three closed doors on the right-hand side. Beyond the staircase, there was an open door at the end of the hallway. From the sounds and smells escaping, he guessed it led to the kitchen. The young man opened the first door on the right.

‘If you wait in here, I will see if the secretary can speak to you.’ The young man left and closed the door behind him. Anthony looked around. It was a fine panelled room with a window overlooking the street. There was a rectangular table with six chairs in the middle of the room, with an oriental-looking carpet under them, and extending about half-way across the wooden floor towards the walls. Paintings hung on the walls, an eclectic mix of religious art, landscapes and seascapes. It was the room that they had shown John Beaton into. At the opposite end of the room to the window, there was a

large portrait he recognised as King Philip of Spain, the late Queen Mary's husband. The man who he had seen with John Beaton in this room had been older and far better dressed than the young man who had just shown him in. He had exhibited a military bearing, he thought. He put his basket of wines on the table and was just wondering whether or not he should sit when the door opened again and a short man came in.

'I'm told you are here to sell wine. I have to tell you we have our own supplier.'

'I'm sure, but you must get through a lot of wine at an embassy. This is the Spanish embassy, isn't it?'

'Well, yes, but it isn't convenient now. Please come back another time.' Anthony thought there was something dejected about the man.

'Yes, of course. I'll come back another day.' He picked up his wines, and the secretary showed him to the door. Anthony left, and the secretary closed the door behind him.



Anthony was having a drink at a table outside the Champs des Oiseaux tavern on Rue St. Honore when he saw the Spanish secretary walk past, staring at the ground a few feet in front of him. Again, Anthony thought he looked dejected and deeply troubled. Perhaps this was an opportunity to find out what was happening in the Spanish embassy. He called out to him. The secretary turned and looked at Anthony blankly.

'Hello again. I didn't have a chance to introduce myself the other day. My name is Foscari, Antonio Foscari.'

‘I’m Ramón Aguilar,’ sighed the secretary. ‘I am sorry, I was rather curt the other day.’

‘Why don’t you join me for a drink, and we can start again?’ Anthony said, indicating the vacant chair opposite.

‘I don’t know, I should get on, but thank you for the offer.’

‘You look exhausted. Where’s the harm in taking a rest for five minutes? I haven’t spoken to anyone all morning, nor sold a single bottle of wine,’ Anthony lied. Ramón shrugged and sat down at the table. Anthony lifted his goblet and signalled to the waiter for another. The waiter brought the goblet. Anthony filled it from the flagon of wine and handed it to Ramón.

‘How long have you worked at the embassy?’ Anthony asked.

‘It’s coming up to six years now.’

‘That’s quite a while. I never seem able to settle anywhere for very long. You must be well regarded.’

‘I hope so. I’m certainly never short of work. The pile of papers is never ending.’

‘Well, that’s something, it’s good to have steady work, don’t you think? I carry my case of wine from door to door, and if I get an order from one in ten, I consider myself lucky. Yours must be interesting work, I should imagine. Is it a well-paid position?’ Anthony enquired.

‘It has its moments, and it should be well paid.’ Ramón sighed, swilling the wine around and around in his goblet.

‘You should take a sip, it’s actually quite a decent wine. It’s not as good as my wines, obviously, but quite

palatable,' Anthony said, studying Ramón's face.

'I'm sorry, I'm not very good company, perhaps I should go.'

'No, finish your wine first, it'll do you good. Do you live in, at the embassy, or do you have rent to pay?'

'No, I live with my wife and youngest son in a house near the Les Halles market.'

'How many children do you have?' Anthony asked.

'Two girls and three boys.'

'What are their names?'

'My eldest son is Juan. He's a teacher back home in Madrid. He recently married a nice girl and they are expecting our first grandchild.'

'That's wonderful. You must be very proud.'

'Our second son, Bernardo, is training for the priesthood in Santiago de Compostella. Our daughters, Sophia and Maria, are soon to be married as well. They are staying with their aunt in Madrid. We hope to get back for the weddings, but it doesn't look as if that is going to be possible.'

'Why not?' Anthony asked.

'We don't have the money, and there is a something else.'

'That's a pity. But your children must be a great blessing to you. I hope to find a wife one day and have a family. You're a lucky man, Ramón.'

'You are right. In many ways I am.'

'You said you had three sons. You told me about Juan and Bernardo. What's your other son's name?'

'Our youngest son, Miguel, is only five. It was quite a surprise when we found my wife, Donna, was pregnant

again. He lives here with us, but poor Miguel is very ill and we can't afford a doctor. We can't even think about the weddings of our daughters while he is so ill. Donna and I are almost at desperation point.'

'I'm very sorry to hear about Miguel. Not having a family of my own, I can only imagine what you're going through. But I'm quite familiar with being short of money. There isn't a fortune to be made from selling wine door to door, unless you're the boss. Mr Lavigne does all right. My commission is miserly and often late.'

'I haven't been paid for three months now. It's very worrying. We're desperate to get Miguel to a doctor.'

'Can't you borrow the money? Wouldn't the ambassador give you an advance on your salary?' Anthony asked.

'I've asked him, but he cannot at the moment. And little Miguel just gets worse every day. I don't know how long we can wait.'

'Oh, that's awful. I think I may be able to help you. When do you finish work?' Anthony said, and Ramón looked up.

'You can help my son?' Ramón asked, and for the first time since they had met, Anthony saw a glimmer of hope in the man's eyes.

'Yes, I'm sure of it. What time can you get away from the office?'

'Around sunset. My eyes are too poor for the candles and oil lamps these days.'

'Meet me back here at sunset tomorrow, then. I'm sure I can fix something. I may be able to arrange a sort of loan, to tide you over.'



Don Francés was adjusting the wick of his oil lamp when there was a knock on his study door.

‘Come in!’ The door opened and Captain Rodriguez entered and bowed.

‘Your Excellency, there has been a development. I had the Venetian spy under observation and he met someone in the tavern on Rue St. Honore this evening.’

‘Anyone of interest?’ asked Don Francés.

‘Your secretary, Aguilar, Your Excellency. They spoke for around half an hour.’

‘Dios! Ramón! Are you sure? Of course you are, I’m sorry. I will question Ramón in the morning. Have a man keep the Venetian’s lodgings under observation. Thank you, Rodriguez, you have done well.’



It was early morning and Marie Dufour was sweeping the kitchen floor, but her mind was elsewhere. She was thinking about the handsome young Venetian who had come to stay. They had exchanged glances, but there had been little conversation as yet, although his French was excellent. Marie’s mother had always found some chore for her whenever he came down in the morning. This morning Madam Dufour had gone to fetch the bread herself and Marie was alone in the kitchen when Anthony came downstairs.

‘Good morning Monsieur,’ said Marie, ‘Mother has just gone to fetch some bread. Will you wait? There is a little wine and water on the table.’

‘Thank you, Marie, but I have much to do today. I have had some success, at work, and expect some extra

money soon. I wonder, would you like to come to the theatre with me? The Hôtel de Bourgogne on Rue Mauconseil, I've heard that the troupe there perform some very amusing farces.'

'Oh, Monsieur Foscari, that sounds wonderful. I have heard of them, of course, and always wanted to go.'

'Perfect, we shall go this evening. And you must call me Antonio.' Anthony smiled and Marie blushed as he put on his hat and cape and left by the front door.



Anthony waited all day at the Champs des Oiseaux tavern on Rue St. Honore. He had brought some money that he had saved from his monthly allowance. The plan was that he would exchange this for some small letters, something that the Spanish ambassador would not miss, yet he could use to convince Sir Henry to invest a much larger sum for more. There was no sign of Ramón. What could have happened? Some crisis with his son, perhaps? The ambassador may have had work for him which kept him from the rendezvous. Either way, he must be patient. He was close to something big, a genuine breakthrough, he could feel it. He would come and wait again tomorrow. The sun was setting and the citizens of Paris were scurrying back to their homes. The merchants were packing away their goods and wheeling their stalls away. Despite his disappointment at an unproductive day, he smiled at the thought of Marie. He drained his wine goblet and called the waiter over, paid his bill and left. Behind him Captain Rodriguez and three of his soldiers also paid their bill and followed.

Anthony kept to the centre of the road, side-stepping

the horses and carts. He was intent on avoiding any excrement flung from a window, that might take the edge off his amorous intentions with Marie. As he passed the English ambassador's house he thought of popping in to alert Sir Henry about his impending success, but he didn't want to keep Marie waiting. He hurried on, oblivious of the shadows closing in on him from both sides of the street. As he turned into Rue Des Augustines two burly men seized his arms, and someone behind him jerked his neck back with a hand firmly placed over his mouth. Anthony writhed as they dragged him into a dark alley off the street to the right. He tried to shout, but the hand was too firmly fixed over his mouth. Anthony tried to bite it, but couldn't get any purchase on the palm. His left arm became almost free as the assailant on his left changed his grip and he tried to pull his arm up to his mouth just as a fist landed hard in his stomach and every breath of wind left him. He fell limp and then a bright light was replaced by blackness as he slipped from consciousness.