

Incarnation

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extract

Chapter 1

It was a cold, bright, crisp sunny morning in spring when the letter arrived. I remember it well, not simply because the letter was so unexpected and yet so significant but also because the cherry tree on the south side of the chalet was still in full blossom. The two events, the arrival of the letter and the floral display have remained eternally linked in my mind.

The blossom might have lasted another week, but certainly no longer. Whilst it flowered, it was magnificent; but like many things in life, it was ephemeral, short-lived, a passing interlude of the spring. Nevertheless, it was significant; it marked the end of the winter. And, somewhat like the letter, it marked the end of a period in my life. However, I couldn't tell you the exact date when the letter arrived except that I know it was early May and that the year was 1998.

Indeed, that year, there was still a lot of snow high up in the mountains behind the chalet. Lower down, where I lived, it had already disappeared, although it had hardly been a month since the last of the snow had fallen in the garden. As was normal, with each sunny day and with fewer and lighter frosts, the snow melted with remarkable rapidity. Only dirty vestiges remained where the snowplough had piled the snow up in heaps along the road outside, and where the sun failed to penetrate. But, inevitably, even these vestiges, ageing witnesses to a hard winter, would also soon diminish with the higher summer daytime temperatures.

Everywhere in the valley there seemed already to be burgeoning flowers. An abundant display of daffodils, tulips, bluebells, primroses, and cowslips sometimes seemed curiously out of place, but then spring in the Alps invariably comes with such urgency that everything tries to compete at the same time. It's a real race against the clock for the attention of all manner of insects and birds. Despite having only lived there for no more than a couple of years I had already observed that there was never the ordered, regulated succession of blossoms that I was more familiar with in England. Moreover, the rapid and marked change in the seasons was still able to astonish me.

For weeks I had dressed in several layers of winter clothes and then quite suddenly, over no more than a matter of a few days, it was t-shirts and shorts and, I would most likely dress like that until mid to late autumn.

That memorable morning, when I went to collect the local paper from the metal post box at the end of my short drive, I found the letter from England. The box sat on the fine-tooled granite coping stone on one of the stone pillars at the entrance to my property. Like sentinels, there were two of them and they served to hold a pair of rustic wooden gates that had seen better days. Each time that I regarded them, I noted with some dismay that they were another job that lay in store for the future.

The letter was a surprise for two reasons. First, it was actually concealed underneath the morning paper and secondly, I supposed that the postman, must have passed by quite early that morning. Whilst the newspaper was normally delivered at about eight o'clock in

the morning, Giovanni usually came by much later, and generally well after ten. I surmised that he must have had some other plans for that day which probably relied on his finishing early. Maybe he was going fly-fishing, the season had just begun and I knew that this was a sport about which he was especially keen.

It must have been about half-past eight when I went out and, although the garden and the terrace were already bathed in sunshine, it was still a little fresh. It was the sort of day when the change in temperature would be overwhelming. There hadn't been a frost overnight; nevertheless, it would have been near freezing at dawn. By midday, the temperature would be in the high twenties, and by mid-afternoon possibly even higher. The heat of the morning sun on my back was already noticeable despite the cool air that seemed to circulate around my knees.

When I went back inside the chalet I placed the letter on the breakfast bar and went to make some phone calls. I had arranged to meet a client with a contractor later that day and I wanted to make sure that they would turn up. I really hated it when people were late, or didn't turn up, I thought it selfish and disrespectful and it was such a waste of time for the others. But I had found, living in Italy, that time had a different conceptual meaning to that in England and that it was therefore necessary, if not to say essential, to remind contractors particularly to turn up to meetings. Finally satisfied that everyone would meet their obligations, I made a coffee, took it outside to sit in the sun on the stone terrace and read the newspaper. And, as it transpired, I completely forgot about the letter.

It was much later, nearer lunchtime when I rediscovered it sitting silently on the breakfast bar. I picked it up and examined it again, this time with interest. The envelope was off-white, nearly cream coloured, of a heavy grade paper of noticeably good quality, the stamp was franked, and the origin was London. It had been posted only two days earlier. At the time, when I first read the letter, I had no concept of the deep significance that it held for me. Even now, I still find it quite astonishing how the arrival of one unexpected, seemingly trivial piece of paper could so fundamentally change one's life. Nevertheless, it did, and how!

I slit the envelope with an ivory letter opener that had been left to me by my father. What its origin was, I had no idea and, to be frank with you, at the time, I had never really given much thought to its provenance. I liked it though. The workmanship was finely detailed and it was exquisite. So, apart from being functional, it was at the same time both decorative and artistic. I imagined that it must also have been quite old especially as the use of ivory is now banned worldwide.

It was made out of a single piece of ivory and it was decorated along the top edge with a delicately carved string of monkeys following each other holding hands or tails. Their expressions were mischievous and the object had a sense of fun about it, demonstrating a high degree of wit as well as craftsmanship. I had imagined that it was probably Asiatic, possibly Chinese or Japanese. Now of course, its significance, and its provenance, is obvious.

I removed the letter from the envelope and saw immediately that it was from a firm of solicitors based in London. The letter was printed on a paper that matched that of the envelope and the letterhead, which was imposing, was a deep mauve colour and embossed.

Greenheart, Grimalkin and Gregory, apparently, were a long established law firm having their head office at Lincolns Inn Field. I noted that their headed notepaper mentioned the year 1851, and I wondered if the three had studied law together, or if the firm had grown over the years, and that it was simply a coincidence that the principal partner's, or founder's names all started with the letter G. The answer to that particular question I never found out

but I did learn subsequently that they were familiarly known in the legal business as *G cubed* or simply the *3Gs*.

Their letter was quite formal and it was addressed to me, David Veronesi Esq.

Dear Mr Veronesi,

We are writing to inform you of the death of your great uncle, Jasper Cornelius Veronesi. Please accept our deepest condolences.

We are advised that Mr J C Veronesi died on the 10th December 1988 whilst on a visit to the People's Republic of China. For some time, nearly ten years, his death remained unreported to the authorities in Hong Kong where he was listed as being resident. It is only recently, following the recent transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong from Great Britain to the People's Republic of China that this information became known. The Chinese authorities were unable to explain why the news of his death was not reported before.

Mr J C Veronesi was a long-standing client of ours and we have in our possession papers confirming you as his sole heir. As a matter of course we have diligently researched his genealogy to ascertain whether there might be other claimants to his estate. We believe that there are none and that you are the only remaining relative. As such we believe that you will be the sole beneficiary of his estate and that his bequeath will be uncontested.

We would be grateful if you could contact our office at your earliest convenience to arrange a meeting with Mr George Spooner, one of our senior partners who will be pleased to advise you of the implications of this inheritance.

It is very important that you bring along to the meeting originals of your and your father's birth certificates, your mother and father's wedding certificate, your passport, a copy of your last UK Inland Revenue Assessment, and details of a preferred bank account where payment can eventually be made.

We look forward to hearing from you and to meeting you in the near future.

Yours etc. etc.

The letter was signed in elegant flowing lines in permanent blue ink. The elaborate signature of George Spooner, one of the senior partners, conveyed panache, authority, confidence, and even perhaps a little artistic merit. I especially remember being impressed by the attention he made of the G and the S.

As for Jasper Cornelius Veronesi, my great uncle, I had hardly given him a passing thought in years having only heard of him very briefly. He was someone that I'd never met. Indeed, I knew pretty well nothing of him and I had no idea that he lived in Hong Kong. I presumed, incorrectly as it transpired, that my father probably knew him rather better than I did. However, I couldn't recall that my father had ever really talked to me in any detail about his uncle. Indeed, I was surprised to learn that not only had he died in China, but also that he had still been around up until ten years earlier.

Of course, it goes without saying that the letter intrigued me greatly, so much so in fact, that I immediately felt compelled to call the number on the embossed headed notepaper. I didn't have to wait long before a woman answered; she sounded well educated, young and spritely.

'Greenheart, Grimalkin and Gregory,' she rattled off like a well-maintained machine gun.

'Ah, yes,' I replied. 'My name's Veronesi and I'd like to make an appointment to see Mr George Spooner.'

'Could you give me your full name please?'

'Of course; it's David Veronesi.'

'Thank you, Mr Veronesi, I'll put you through to Mr Spooner's secretary.'

His secretary was very helpful and explained that George Spooner had left the day before for Hong Kong and that he would be back on Tuesday the following week. His diary was quite full but if I were free to make a meeting on the morning of Friday 29th May at 10.00, he would be able to spend the rest of the morning with me. It sounded fine to me, so we fixed it. Before we finished our conversation, she took the opportunity of reminding me of the importance of my bringing all the relevant documents with me. I told her that I had noted the request and would ensure that everything they had asked for would be available.

In fact, I was able to lay my hands quite easily on all the documents. When I had moved to Italy, I had been obliged to provide most of them in any event to open a bank account, to obtain a *Carta de Soggiorno*, to join the *Ordine Degli Architetti*, and to register with the Italian tax authorities. Of course, there were many other formalities to complete, such as importing my car, organising insurance and the like, not to mention dealing with the public services and service providers; but being able to produce these documents was really the key to doing all these things reasonably efficiently and successfully.

Luckily, my current business affairs were reasonably flexible and taking a little time off was never going to be much of a problem. I worked for myself; I had relatively few clients, and filled in my spare time with walking in the mountains, painting watercolours, and I dabbled in a bit of writing. And, as it transpired, my lifestyle was pretty well ideal for what subsequently turned out to be in store for me. Though, of course, I had no idea at that moment in time what the consequences of my meeting with George Spooner were going to be. However, as you might imagine, I could only reasonably presume that there must be something to inherit; otherwise there would be no point in writing to me, let alone arranging a meeting. What that bequest might be though, I had absolutely no idea.

I booked a flight from Turin to Gatwick for the following Thursday along with two nights in a small bed and breakfast place in Edith Road, West Kensington. I had no particular desire to stay in London any longer than was strictly necessary and as I had nowhere else in the UK where I wanted to go, I booked my return flight to Turin for the Saturday afternoon. If there weren't any delays, I reckoned that I should be back in my chalet by the early evening. So much the better, I thought, because that would leave me Sunday to enjoy myself.

In a way, the few days that followed seemed to be long and drawn out, as well as quite frustrating. I felt unusually eager to get to London and was already feeling quite excited at the prospect of meeting Mr George Spooner. I wondered what it was that he would reveal to me and I had a sort of premonition that it wouldn't be quite what I could have reasonably expected.

At least on that score, I was right!

Chapter 2

Not surprisingly, although I knew the city very well, London did seem rather exotic after the Italian Alps where I lived. It was noisy, vibrant, extraordinary busy, very cosmopolitan and seemed full of tourists. I suppose that it was pretty well the complete opposite to where I then lived, which was quiet, rustic and calm, and where I was considered to be the only resident tourist.

I lived in a small stone built chalet that was situated in the mountains near to the outskirts of Aosta. There was a placid rhythm of life about the place that had probably hardly altered in decades. Of course, Aosta was noticeably busier during the summer holidays, and the Val d'Aoste was also a tourist destination as well as the main route between Italy and France using the Mont Blanc tunnel. However, where I lived, apart from those five or six weeks during the summer, it was mostly calm.

After living in London, where I had worked for a period in my life, I very much appreciated the change. For me it was a haven of peace and I think that I needed it. Everything happened when it happened and nothing seemed rushed. The postman did his rounds, the shops all closed at midday, and most workmen finished at four in the afternoon, which generally marked the five-minute rush hour for what it was. Apart from that, the cows were milked, the cheese was made, and the hams were hung in the chimneys to smoke and cure. The people spoke a gentle kind of patois. Sometimes it seemed like Italian with a French accent and sometimes more like French with an Italian accent, but if you could speak the two languages, which fortunately I could, it was never really a problem. And, I got on well with the locals who generally regarded me as something of a curiosity.

I had also learnt very quickly that things that were considered important actually weren't really that important and, things that weren't really important, rarely got done. It was one of the reasons I always rang up before meetings, just to make sure that the arrangements were kept. Without reinforcing the importance of attending meetings there was always a chance that only half of the invitees would turn up and then, unfortunately, it would turn out to be a complete waste of time.

Most businesses were small, very often no more than a married couple, or a small family, and it was inevitable and accepted that their business would probably stay that way forever. They would never expand, even if an opportunity presented itself. The social charges for employing anyone in Italy were even higher than they were in France, and the complication of getting rid of anyone was so complex, that it was never worth taking the risk of employing anyone. Even starting up a business, compared to starting a business in the UK was a turgid affair that discouraged many. Like its close neighbour, France, it was over-

regulated and over-taxed. Consequently, and not surprisingly, I came to understand that the black economy thrived. I found it shocking at first, but then I got used to it; it was just a different way of life where everyone cheated the government. It was accepted. Moreover, for some, it was undoubtedly the only means of economic survival.

I really enjoyed living there though and, I did strive to keep my business well above board, despite the number of occasions that I was offered cash with a wink and a nod. As a foreigner, I never thought it wise to play the same tax-avoidance game that many of the locals did. I suppose also that it wasn't really part of my culture. Being brought up in Britain, one had the view that laws were to be enforced and obeyed rather than circumvented or simply ignored, although others may disagree with me.

For me, living in the Alps was like being in one big playground, and the pace of life was considerably more relaxed than that in the UK. I suppose deep down, it was one of the principal reasons why I had decided to move there as well as wanting to be closer to the mountains. Having a less pressured life allowed me time to think as well as doing other things.

I had developed a passion for mountaineering when I attended university and being in Italy next to some of the biggest mountains in Europe offered so many possibilities. Whenever I had an opportunity, I was somewhere in the Mont Blanc massif, on the Monte Rosa plateau, or in the Gran Paradiso, ski touring, climbing, or walking. And, when I wasn't doing that, there was always work to do on the chalet, never mind doing something about the rotting gates!

The flight from Turin to Gatwick took me over my snow-covered paradise and across France via Dijon and Paris. At Gatwick, I took the express into Victoria Station and by Thursday evening, after booking into my hotel, I'd found a small Chinese restaurant in Soho that specialised in Cantonese cuisine. It was inexpensive and good quality cooking. It was excellent value for money, but the service was so rapid that I was in and out in less than half-an-hour. I thought that it was symptomatic of city life. I didn't know anyone, I felt like a stranger and, although it was fast food near its best, it hardly seemed to have been a cultural experience.

After having dined, I went for a walk taking a devious route through the streets of Soho towards Lincoln Inn Fields. I wanted to research where I was supposed to be heading the following day. I had often done the same sort of thing when I lived in London; walking was a sure way of getting to know the city and, sometimes, it resulted in some wholly unpredictable discoveries.

When I arrived at the address and was finally satisfied that the elegant, brick built Georgian terraced building that I'd found was the home to '*G-cubed*', I headed north, again on foot, to the tube station at Holborn. I got the Piccadilly Line back to West Kensington and walked the rest of the way back to my hotel.

The following morning, after a full English breakfast, a temptation that I couldn't resist, but which I sincerely regretted for the rest of the day, I took the tube back to Holborn. The station was surprisingly convenient, a stone's throw away from the solicitor's office and it only took me about ten minutes to walk to there.

I don't think that their office held any real surprises for me; the interior rather confirmed what I had expected from the outside. Being an architect and having studied interior design, I could have probably accurately described it without ever having visited it, especially considering the age of the practice and their likely clientele.

It was quaintly plush, never really over-stated, mostly polished wood and leather, certainly dated in style, but well maintained. Despite the grandeur of the building, however,

the waiting room was remarkably small indicating that either they didn't have many visitors, or that the practice was exceedingly well organised. No visitor would ever wait for long and the time allocated for appointments would be strictly observed. In fact, I managed only a casual glance at a copy of Tatler before a smart, elegantly dressed, tall, middle-aged woman came into the room and addressed me.

'Good morning Mr Veronesi,' she smiled. 'Mr Spooner is ready to see you now. Would you like to follow me, please?'

I carefully returned the magazine to a neatly arranged rack and dutifully followed her out of the waiting room into a corridor with a polished tiled floor; probably original I thought. When we arrived at the end, she knocked gently on a closed panelled door bearing a brass plate, opening it slightly at the same time.

'Come,' a commanding, disembodied voice floated out from the interior of the room.

'Mr Veronesi,' she announced.

'Come,' the voice repeated.

'Please go in, Mr Veronesi,' she said smiling again, opening the door wider for me. I thanked her and entered. I heard the door close quietly behind me. I remember suddenly feeling slightly nervous. Up until that point I'd been quite relaxed, but the feeling of expectation suddenly grew in me. I felt rather as if I might be entering a dragon's den. I needn't have been at all concerned though as George Spooner's kindly manner rapidly put me at my ease.

However, he was not at all what I had expected. For a start, he was much younger than I had envisaged that he would be. I estimated that he was most likely in his mid-forties. I had rather anticipated meeting a senior partner who would probably be knocking on sixty, white haired and wrinkled, or, if not wrinkled, then at least portly. I was wrong; George Spooner was none of these. He was tall, athletic, bronzed, and still carried a patina of youth. Indeed, when I thought about it, he was probably not that much older than I was and, clearly, he was also probably doing a lot better. He immediately moved his swivel chair back towards the window behind him, got up, and came round his desk to greet me.

'I'm so delighted to meet you at last, Mr Veronesi.' We shook hands. 'Please, take a seat.'

He indicated a large leather Chesterfield armchair away from his desk. It was next to a low table on which there was already a file. He sat down opposite me in a matching armchair. We exchanged a few pleasantries about journeys and the typical British weather before he asked if I had brought all the documents they had requested. I said that I had and removed a folder from the plastic leather briefcase that I was carrying.

George Spooner took his time to examine each of the documents thoroughly. 'Very good,' he said, as he worked through them. 'Excellent, thank you.' Then he got up, walked over to the door, and opened it slightly. He called to his secretary.

'Jemima, could you possibly photocopy these for me please.' Jemima, whose name I would never have guessed, took the papers from him and disappeared again. The solicitor returned to his chair, sat down, and smiled at me.

'You know, it's quite a relief to find you, Mr Veronesi,' he said. 'We were somewhat concerned at first that this estate might pass to the Crown; never the best solution in my opinion. There was very little to indicate that your great uncle had any relatives. But, we had a stroke of luck and thankfully, we found you.'

'I must admit that your letter came as a bit of a surprise,' I said. That was an understatement. 'I had no idea that I had a relative in the Far East. What was he doing in China anyway, visiting?' I suggested.

‘No, not at all, he certainly wasn’t visiting the country. Effectively, he’d apparently spent most of his adult life there. He worked for the British Government for forty years and then retired and decided to remain there some many years ago.’

‘Do I have any other relatives in China?’

‘We don’t think so. We’ve carried out some extensive genealogical research and so far come up with nothing. He didn’t marry, he didn’t have any children as far as we are aware, his siblings all died before him, only one of them had any children, your grandfather, and it seems pretty clear that you are the sole heir.’

‘I see.’

So, what was I about to inherit? Not his debts I hoped!

‘Perhaps you could fill me in with a little more detail,’ I asked. ‘For example, how did your firm become involved in the first place, and what do you think the implications are for me as his sole heir.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said. He then took his time and explained the main history for me. Naturally, he started with his own firm.

He told me that Greenheart, Grimalkin and Gregory had enjoyed a presence in Hong Kong for well over a hundred years. One of George Spooner’s current responsibilities as a senior partner in the firm was Hong Kong. Recently, because of the transfer of sovereignty of the former colony to China this had involved him in a great deal of work. Some people were leaving, selling property, and transferring their fortune to other parts of the world. Others, less concerned with moving, were speculating on the changing circumstances and looking at housing and commercial opportunities.

‘At present, I go to Hong Kong at least once a month and I normally stay there for one and sometimes two weeks. At first, I don’t mind telling you, I found it quite tiring, but one gets used to it and uses the journey to catch up on sleep.’ He paused for an instant. ‘Now, I have to tell you that this affair concerning your great uncle arrived somewhat unexpectedly. The practice had not heard from your relative for a good many years and had actually mothballed his files.’

He explained that my great uncle, at least I understood the relationship now, had actually made a will in the nineteen-thirties leaving everything that he owned to his brother, my grandfather. He appointed the solicitors as his executors, and left a copy of the documents with their office in Hong Kong. It had remained there ever since and there was no record of it having ever been changed. There were no codicils, the will had never been modified and, to all intents and purposes, the will remains perfectly valid. There was however, something else that my great uncle did which was quite astonishing, but I’ll come to that in a moment.

‘The will was very simple; he left his entire estate to your grandfather, or his brother’s successors in title. His brother was your paternal grandfather. There had been a third brother, Charles, but he was killed at the battle of the Somme in the First World War. Charles was engaged, but never married and so there was no issue from that line and Jasper Cornelius never married.’

I listened attentively. I had met my paternal grandfather on a few occasions when I was very young, but he died in 1970 when I was only eight years old. My paternal grandmother had died a few years earlier and I knew even less about her. As for discussing the family with my father, we hardly discussed anything, although I knew that he was an only child. After the divorce with my mother, which had been a difficult and acrimonious affair, my father became even more withdrawn than was his habit before. But, by then, I had already left home and was at university studying to become an architect.

Architecture was a long course, five years at university and two years in practice. I qualified when I was twenty-six and afterwards I was much occupied in finding a job and working towards my professional practice examinations. Two years later, when I was twenty-eight, just at the time when I had marital problems of my own, my father suddenly died at the age of sixty-four from a heart attack. The funeral, needless to say, was a sorry affair. In total, there couldn't have been more than six of us and I was the sole representative of the family. I was my father's sole heir.

'I understand from your letter that my great uncle actually died about ten years ago.'

'Yes, that is the case. We were informed only a couple of months ago and immediately started a search for relatives.'

'Why did the details of his death take so long to get to you?'

'I'm sorry but I have no means of answering that question, Mr Veronesi. Certainly, we believe that there was an element of delay because he died in an especially remote part of China. I'm not suggesting of course that it was backward, far from it, but something clearly went wrong. We were told that recently, a new official had been appointed to the area and that he noted that the Hong Kong authorities had never been informed of your great uncle's death. It's possible also that the changes to do with the relationship of Hong Kong to mainland China, may have precipitated something but, as I said, I really don't know.'

'So they got in touch with you.'

'In fact, no they didn't. In trying to track his history down, the Chinese authorities got in touch with the Hong Kong Inland Revenue in the first instance, who furnished the address of his accountants. It was the accountants, who then informed us. Much like us, they are a well-established firm who have had a presence in Hong Kong for many years. It was at that point that we really became involved properly again.'

'Where was he when he died?'

'According to the papers that we received, he was in the province of Gansu, in northwest China where he had been living for sometime.'

'How old was he?'

'He was ninety-seven.'

'Then he must have been born in eighteen ninety,' I quickly calculated.

'Yes, indeed, in fact he was the oldest of the three brothers and he outlived them all.'

'Did he have property in Gansu?'

'Nothing that we know of, but he did have property in Hong Kong, as you will see when you go there.'

'I'm going to Hong Kong?'

I hadn't imagined that this would be necessary. What I had envisaged was that there would certainly be some paperwork to complete in London but not much else. Going to Hong Kong came as something of a surprise.

'We think that it would be in your interests to visit Hong Kong. He was the owner of a triplex penthouse flat, which although unoccupied for several years is still in very good order. In addition, he was an obsessive collector of Chinese antiquities of which, I must warn you, there are many. And, finally, there will be some documents to deal with which frankly would be much easier if you were there.'

'I see.'

It was all that I could manage; my mind was already conjuring with the prospect of visiting Hong Kong never mind how much it would cost.

‘If you’re worried about the expense of travelling, you have no need to be. I can tell you now that you will be the beneficiary of at least four million Hong Kong dollars, before selling property, antiques, or realising shares.’

‘What’s that in pounds sterling?’ I enquired, I had no idea of currency rates; four million sounded a lot.

‘Over three hundred thousand pounds.’

I made another calculation – into Lira, not bad then! It was of course before Italy adopted the euro.

‘I see, well there’s no question about it. I’ll be delighted to come to Hong Kong.’ I’d need to rearrange some of my appointments but I didn’t envisage that would pose much of a problem.

‘Splendid,’ he said. ‘Would you like me to make the arrangements?’

‘Why not.’ I think I was feeling unusually magnanimous.

‘Could I suggest that your visit should coincide with my next visit there which will be in about two weeks time. That would also give you time to go back to Italy and to organise a tourist visa for Mainland China.’

I obviously looked confused, why would I want to visit Mainland China?

‘You may need to visit Gansu,’ he suggested, clarifying his statement.

‘Right.’

‘I would also suggest booking a flight with flexible dates for the return, one never knows when dealing with the Chinese authorities exactly how long some of these things will take.’

‘I’m happy to take your advice.’

‘Good, then I’ll ask my secretary to liaise with you and make all the necessary arrangements.’

‘Thank you; is there anything else you can tell me about my great uncle before I go to Hong Kong.’

‘Indeed there is. In fact, there is rather too much to tell you now, so we have prepared a brief biographical note for you. It’s compiled from what we already knew about him and from what we have been able to subsequently research.’ He passed the file across the table. ‘Read it at your leisure, it will definitely give you a flavour of the man; it appears that he was quite interesting, if not, extraordinary!’ He smiled. ‘There is one other thing. It’s something that we can discuss further in Hong Kong, but your uncle did have a Trading Company. In fact, it was partly the key to tracking you down.’

‘Really.’

‘Yes, it goes by the name of The Jade Cormorant Trading Company and you are listed as one of the Directors.’

‘What!’ I told you that my great uncle had done something else!

‘Yes, apparently so.’

‘How could he do that without me signing something?’

‘Good question, but he did. I suspect he signed on your behalf.’

‘You mean forged my signature.’

‘Not exactly, it’s not the term that we would use. Let’s say he just signed in your name, however, it was accepted, and it is properly registered. No one is going to question it now.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘On your eighteenth birthday and just before he left for Gansu Province.’

‘I see.’ I reflected. ‘Is this a problem?’

‘No, we don’t think so. Indeed, it’s probably the reverse; it may simplify some matters.’

‘How so?’

‘If the company, of which you are now the sole director, chooses to realise some of its assets, that is, sell property, you may be obliged only to pay corporation tax on the receipts rather than death duties. Considering the sums involved, this may very well be to your advantage. In addition, if you decide that the company should invest money, you can decide as and when you take money out of the company for whatever purpose. As I mentioned, there are accountants who formerly helped your uncle with his affairs, they would no doubt be pleased to meet you and discuss what options you have and what the tax implications might be.’

‘So, the company does have assets.’

‘Indeed it does and probably more than double in value than the sum I have already quoted to you.’

I was stunned. It left me with considerably rather more to think about than I had ever anticipated. And, effectively, that little bombshell pretty well signalled the end of the meeting. It didn’t take all morning as I had expected. I imagined though, that if I had decided not to go to Hong Kong, it could well have complicated matters, which might also have resulted in the need for a rather longer meeting.

I thanked George Spooner for his time, said a cheery goodbye to Jemima, who handed a folder back to me containing all my papers, and left the offices in Lincolns Inn Fields with a definite spring in my step.

Clearly, I was about to come into some money! I felt like celebrating.

However, somewhat soberly, I didn’t; I thought that there would be plenty of time for that later. As it transpired, I never really took the opportunity to celebrate my unexpected legacy.

Chapter 3

I had been away from my home for only a few days but the anticyclone, which was now well established over the Alps, had brought very warm weather to northern Italy, summertime temperatures even. The trees, which were bursting into leaf when I had left, were already in the process of transforming from their initial fresh, bright, spring green colour into a deeper, more mature hue. Summer seemed to be urgently stepping on the heels of an exceptionally short spring.

I took advantage of the weather and, after lunch on my terrace, I made an espresso coffee and looked again at the file that George Spooner had given me. The notes concerning Jasper Cornelius turned out to be quite a revelation and, whilst they were by no means an extensive record, they nevertheless described an interesting history of a truly fascinating man. I was already beginning to regret that I had never had the opportunity to meet him. Unlike the rest of my family he seemed to have been something of an adventurer, no doubt possessing certain genes, which had missed being transferred down my father's line.

So briefly, my great uncle, Jasper Cornelius Veronesi, was born in Wimborne, Dorset, on 14th May 1890. His father, my great grandfather, who died long before I came into the world, was called Edward Wilberforce Veronesi. There was no indication when the family, clearly of Italian origin, had actually moved to the British Isles, but there was a note suggesting that they had come to England in the seventeenth century and that they had been specialists in painting frescoes.

Edward Wilberforce, who came along a century and a half later, had married a Matilda Anne Percy-Rivers at Wimborne Minster in the winter of 1885 and Jasper, their first son, was born five years later. The couple had been betrothed for some time, but Edward had been stationed with his regiment, the 1st Kings Dragoon Guards, in India. When Edward returned to marry Matilda, he had recently been commissioned as a Major. He returned with his wife to India but only remained there for another four years. He was invalided out of the service suffering from recurring bouts of malaria and immediately came back to England with his then pregnant wife.

There was a brief note about Edward's father, who apparently had also served with the same regiment and had seen action in China in the Second Chinese War. The regiment, which saw action at Sebastopol at the end of the Crimean War, was dispatched to China in 1857. I wondered immediately if Jasper's obvious interest in the orient and China had stemmed perhaps from contact with his grandfather. I imagined that it probably did.

Jasper, it appears, was a pupil at Wimborne Grammar School. This ancient school was established at the beginning of the sixteenth century and owed its origins to Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry Tudor. That was also interesting. I seemed to remember that

Henry Tudor had married the daughter of Elizabeth Woodville, a Rivers girl, and in doing so combined the houses of York and Lancaster. My great grandmother was a Percy-Rivers and I wondered if that was another connexion.

When Jasper left the grammar school in 1908 he went up to Cambridge, to Christ's College, which coincidentally was also founded by Margaret Beaufort at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Whilst he was at Cambridge, Jasper read Oriental Studies and specialised in classical Chinese. It appears that unlike some of his contemporaries, who were more interested in playing, he was quite focused and recognised as a hard worker. He graduated in 1912 with a double first and was immediately recruited by the Foreign Office. By the summer 1913 he had already left England having been posted initially to join the British Legation in Peking. It's possible that this move to China probably saved his life; had he stayed in England he could have been swept away in the Great War, as was his brother, Charles.

There was no information on the file as to whether he had ever returned to England, although I imagine that he must have done at some time or other. However, apart from several short periods in India, including a stint during the Second World War, he did seem to have spent most of his life in China. And, very much in line with the old Chinese curse, he certainly lived through interesting times.

At the point when he had first arrived in China, two thousand years of imperial rule had pretty well just about evaporated, and the Japanese, the 'old enemy,' were being greatly encouraged by Sun Yat-sen, the first president and founding father of the Chinese National Party, to help bring China into an industrial age as quickly as was possible. However, in the power vacuum created by these extraordinary, difficult conditions, there was a rapid emergence of warlords, epic power struggles, and the initial development of an embryonic and subsequently hugely popular communist party. And, not long after, unable to resist the temptation, the imperialist Japanese army could hardly miss the opportunity to take advantage of the confused situation and invade.

The file indicated that during his first twenty years in China, Jasper Cornelius had travelled extensively. He had ventured as far north as Mongolia, traversed as far west as Tibet, and descended south to Hong Kong. His main purpose in travelling was stated to be 'cultural', but unquestionably, if he were working for the Foreign Office, he would also have been responsible for collecting as much up to date information as possible on a wide range of developments affecting the country. In other words, he was also a spy, and I imagined that it could well have been a fairly dangerous activity. Although theoretically he would have been afforded diplomatic status, parts of the country were so lawless that this would hardly have guaranteed him any protection at all.

However, it appears that he made it known whilst he was travelling, that he also was especially interested in buying unusual *objets d'art*, paintings, artefacts, furniture and ceramics. Apparently, because of the lawlessness in the country and the extensive devastation he saw in many areas, he thought that he should try to save and protect as much as he could. Whether his motives were entirely altruistic or not, I have no idea but, in the process he also became quite an expert on antiques and developed a keen eye on what was actually worth collecting. Finally, by one means or another, most of his acquisitions seemed to have ended up safely in Hong Kong.

When the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1937, he was actually in the province of Gansu in northwest of China. He never attempted returning to Peking; it would have been quite pointless. Instead, he slowly made his way south through Tibet to Lhasa, where he

remained for a short period of time before going south again through Nepal into India. He was lucky; he narrowly missed being interned in Tibet.

By the time that the Second World War had finished, he was already fifty-six years old. He was offered a post in London, but he turned it down saying that he would prefer to go back to China and, being fluent in both Cantonese and Mandarin, he was posted to Hong Kong where he finished his service in the diplomatic corps. He was relieved to learn when he returned to the colony that fortunately, the Japanese had never discovered his hoard of antiquities.

At the time, it was also rather touch and go whether Hong Kong would be swallowed up into Communist China. As it transpired, it wasn't, and this was a further turn of good fortune for him.

Soon afterwards, it appeared that Jasper Cornelius converted some of his acquired wealth into property, investing in a penthouse triplex in a new development in Shek Tong Tsui and, with his retirement, his interest in collecting antiques quickly resurged. Indeed, it appeared that he consecrated most of his time to this activity and continued to travel extensively in Mainland China. I wondered if spiriting art treasures out of the country, which was obviously what he was in the process of doing, was strictly legitimate, but he did it none the less, and to some large extent.

On the other hand, it would be unfair to criticise him too severely. During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard systematically destroyed much of China's heritage and if it hadn't been for him and a few others like him, little would have probably survived. For the Red Guards, anything, which might have been considered as bourgeois, linking the twentieth century with the past, was wrecked. Even families prudently destroyed calligraphy, vases, statues, and works of art that they had owned and treasured for centuries, rather than run the risk of being caught with them and exposed to the violent intolerance of the Red Guards. And Jasper, it seems, through a network of contacts smuggled a substantial number of items into Hong Kong.

Why finally, when he was nearly ninety years old, he should have decided to leave Hong Kong and go north again to Gansu Province wasn't at all clear. What was evident however was that by the time I arrived in Hong Kong his flat would have been unoccupied for about seventeen years. Although George Spooner had said that it was in good condition, I couldn't imagine what kind of state I might find it in - no doubt full of cobwebs.

Understandably, it was something that would have to wait for my visit. Only time would tell on that score.

Chapter 4

There is now a new international airport at Hong Kong, Chek Lap Kok. It was constructed on reclaimed land alongside the island of Lantau. However, when I flew there for the first time, the final approach to the old airport at Kai Tak simply left me gasping. The aeroplane seemed to stand on its side as it made an extremely tight turn before descending rapidly onto the runway. It was reportedly the most dangerous airport in the world and it left most passengers holding their breath until the plane had actually landed!

And, Hong Kong wasn't quite as I expected either. Of course, I had seen pictures of the city, I had even managed to do some research before I left, however, I still wasn't properly prepared for the reality of it. I found London busy, but Hong Kong was rather like London on speed!

Incorrectly, I had also assumed that I would be travelling with George Spooner. This wasn't the case and my travelling companions turned out to be a retired couple making a stopover on the way back to Australia. They were a pleasant pair. In a brief conversation I had with them, he told me that he had been a structural engineer and had played a minor part in the construction of the Sydney Opera House; his wife, who was originally from Italy, had been a teacher. They had come well prepared with sleeping tablets and our conversation developed no further, although I did learn that they were on a triennial visit to Europe and were used to making the trip. Hence, I suppose, their wise preparations for the long flight.

Jemima, George's secretary, had rung me to organise booking tickets for me from Heathrow but in the end it seemed more convenient for me to make my own arrangements and fly from Milan. I took the train from Aosta, changed at Turin, and spent the night in Milan. The Cathay Pacific flight departed just after midday and arrived at breakfast time the following day. In real time, at least according to my body clock, it was actually around about midnight and it took me at least a couple of days to adjust.

Jemima did however confirm that someone from the office in Hong Kong would meet me at the airport and take me to my great uncle's apartment. I don't know why, but up until that point, I had assumed that I would probably be staying in a hotel; obviously, I wasn't. I sincerely hoped that the apartment would be reasonably habitable; I hadn't taken a sleeping bag with me!

After clearing immigration, I looked out for a sign bearing my name. Spotting it wasn't difficult, despite the milling crowd. I'm not sure what I noticed first, the tall, amazingly striking oriental girl who was carrying it, or the sign itself, which looked as if it had been hurriedly written in red lipstick on a white ceramic plate. I went over to her and introduced myself.

‘I’m Lucy,’ she said, quickly hiding the plate and offering me her hand. ‘Welcome to Hong Kong, Mister Veronesi.’

‘Nice to meet you, Lucy,’ I said as we shook hands.

‘Please follow me, Mister Veronesi,’ she said as she slipped the plate into a plastic carrier bag.

Then I played catch-up as Lucy headed for the exit. A wayward suitcase with errant bogies encumbered me. At times it seemed to have an agenda all of its own. Lucy wasn’t so impeded in her progress and her long legs consumed the intervening space rather more quickly and efficiently than I was able to do. She wasn’t difficult to follow though; she was head and shoulders above the crowd. When I joined her on the pavement outside the building she was already in the process of booking a taxi. There was an unending queue of red taxis, mostly it seemed, Toyota Crown Comforts; they all looked new. I thought that they must have been acquired as a job lot! I learned later that they were.

As the crow flies, the distance between the airport and where we were headed was less than four miles, but Kowloon, where the airport was located, and Hong Kong are separated by a large stretch of water, Victoria Harbour. Our driver took the Western Harbour Tunnel, the first of the three tunnels built to link Hong Kong with the mainland. Coming out of the tunnel, we turned right, heading west towards Shek Tong Tsui, the quarter where my great uncle’s flat was located.

I would have liked to engage my escort in conversation, at least to enquire about the provenance of the decorated plate, not only was I curious but I had also been largely deprived of conversation for the previous twelve hours. However, Lucy was continually attached to her mobile phone and chattered incomprehensively and fluently in Cantonese. Between calls, she glanced at me furtively and smiled thinly while composing another number on her phone with both of her long, elegant thumbs. Not long afterwards, she hurriedly terminated her last conversation, and leant forward to tell the taxi driver where to stop.

Apparently, we had already arrived at our destination. The driver parked near to the junction of Hollywood Road and Shin Hing Street, oblivious to the queue rapidly forming behind him and the cacophony of car horns. Lucy settled the bill, insisting on a receipt from him, and soon I was playing catch up again, following her towards a door in a façade of small shops fronts. The door turned out to be the entrance to the apartment block and we entered a small, rather drab looking lobby with a staircase at one end next to two lifts. She summoned a lift, looked at me and tried one of her thin smiles again.

When the lift arrived, rattling to a noisy halt before shuddering open, it also revealed itself surprisingly small, maximum four persons it stated – four small persons, not the current western standard. It felt rather cramped inside for the three of us, that is, if you include my suitcase. We went slowly up to the eleventh floor. It gave me time to think and my first impression of the building was already one of great disappointment; I had anticipated, or perhaps, at least hoped for something grander.

It was a thirteen-storey building and was exceedingly modest compared to more recent developments in the vicinity. The top three floors comprised two large flats, which were side by side. My great uncles apartment occupied the southeast corner, the other flat, occupied the northwest corner. The top two floors of the flat became progressively smaller in area and stepped back to leave room on the twelve (middle floor) for a broad balcony as well as a wrap round terrace on the thirteenth floor.

From the outside, the building looked dated and somewhat tired. Surrounded by newer, taller buildings it also appeared rather incongruous, as if belonging to a different age. In its day, however, it could well have been quite imposing and possibly even the largest

building in the quarter. I wondered why my uncle had decided to live there. The answer to that question turned out to be quite simple, but it wasn't until later that I found out.

The lift rattled slowly up the lift well suddenly stopping abruptly with a loud clunk. We seemed to wait interminably for the door to open before finally stepping out into a small hallway. There were three doors, one of which appeared to lead to the stairwell whilst the doors on either side of it accessed the two flats. Lucy went for the right hand one. The lift lobby was poorly lit, gloomy, looking as if it could do with a good facelift and had the effect of making me feel instantly depressed. I remember wondering immediately how much the apartment might sell for and whether it would go reasonably easily. As I looked around, Lucy searched for the keys in her sack, when she found them she handed them to me with one of her thin smiles.

'These are the keys to your flat, Mister Veronesi, shall we go in?'

I stepped forward and opened the door with some slight trepidation half-expecting to find seventeen years accumulation of mail, bills, and circulars. I was wrong of course; the door opened easily. Immediately it was quite evident that I was entering another world. To be honest, I was simply staggered by what I saw before me.

'Amazing!' I said as the spectacle unfolded. 'Unbelievable!'

'Isn't it,' Lucy added, trying a smile again as her phone rang.

'Have you been here before?' I asked.

My question caused a moments hesitation as she balanced answering the phone and upsetting a client. She made the right decision.

'I came here with my boss, Mr Spooner, to meet the housekeeper.'

'Housekeeper?'

'Yes, her name's Madame Cheung. In fact, I should call her now and tell her that we've arrived.'

In a flash, Lucy was on her mobile speaking rapidly again in Cantonese. I left her to it and deposited my suitcase in the hall near to the front door. Then I began to wander around the ground floor of the apartment.

The hall itself was surprisingly long and wide and appeared to be more of a gallery than a habitable space. On the left hand side was a cloakroom and toilet. At the end of the gallery was one of the largest, most ornate pieces of furniture I think that I had ever seen. Framed scrolls, representing stylised landscapes on paper or on silk, decorated the walls. On the right hand side were two other pieces of furniture, a bureau, and a large chest of drawers. On top of the bureau, a bronze Buddha sat serenely; on the wardrobe were two large blue and yellow matching ceramic vases.

I moved through into what appeared to be a sort of lounge, or sitting room, and was immediately struck by the luminosity. The blinds had been opened and the room was bathed in light. On the floor, a large Chinese carpet formed the centrepiece of the room whilst around the walls there were more examples of antiquity and exotic furniture. In fact, there was much too much furniture. In some places, it seemed to have just been crammed in. There were also boxes, lots of boxes, what they contained I had no idea.

I would have been happy to explore further, but Lucy returned with the news that Mrs Cheung, who apparently lived in a small flat on the third floor, would be up to join us in about five minutes.

'Perhaps I could make some tea.' Lucy suggested.

It sounded like a good idea. 'Why not! Do you know where the kitchen is?'

'It's through the next room,' she replied pointing. I followed her through what appeared to be a dining room. For the size of the apartment, the kitchen was really quite

modest, even small, but then as I subsequently learnt, eating out in Hong Kong is not at all expensive. Why cook at home when there is a whole universe of culinary delights to explore in the street below? It was part of the culture of the place.

The doorbell rang and, as Lucy was in the kitchen preparing the tea, I went to answer it.

Mrs Cheung was about half as tall as Lucy. She was a small, slightly bent, rather wizened woman, probably in her seventies, or possibly even older and, she seemed to sport a permanent sort of smile. However, on that first occasion when we met, she took one look at me and then put her hand over her mouth in total shock.

‘Oh, Mister Veronesi, you so like him!’ She was genuinely astonished. And, right away I realised that up until that moment I had never even seen a photograph of my great uncle.

‘Really.’

It was all I managed to say as Mrs Cheung entered and walked round me, her hand still covering her mouth.

‘You just like him,’ she repeated grabbing my lower arm in a vice like grip.

I sort of smiled at her, still rather stuck for words. All I managed was, ‘Lucy is making some tea.’

We made our way through to the lounge, Mrs Cheung still gripping my arm. We met Lucy half way.

‘How long have you been the housekeeper here?’ I asked Mrs Cheung, disengaging my wrist and, more trying to make conversation rather than interrogate her.

‘Nearly fifty years,’ she said turning to face me, and adding somewhat aggressively, ‘why you ask?’

Lucy intervened with an explanation of the arrangements. ‘Apparently, your uncle travelled a lot and he had an agreement with Mrs Cheung to come in and clean two half-days a week whether he was here, or not. He also had an arrangement with the bank, so that Mrs Cheung could collect her wages in cash, and he ensured that there were always sufficient funds to pay her. Effectively, she been looking after the apartment for the last seventeen years on that basis and she was still expecting him to come back one day.’

‘I not know your uncle die. Very sorry Mister Veronesi.’

‘In fact, I didn’t know either. You know, I never met him, and in fact, I was never really aware of his existence.’

‘He very like you,’ Mrs Cheung said again, this time smiling before she sipped the tea.

‘Mrs Cheung is anxious to know what your plans are for the future. Her work as a housekeeper is an important source of income for her,’ Lucy intervened again.

‘I don’t have any immediate plans. As soon as I do, I will let you know, in the meantime, I would be pleased if Mrs Cheung could continue as housekeeper.’ Lucy spoke to her in Cantonese and a broad smile came to her face. The title, housekeeper, seemed a little grand, but she certainly seemed to have kept the place in good order.

‘You very like your uncle, you know.’ I was beginning to get the message. ‘He never tell me his plans then, he disappear without saying. Where he go?’

‘Gansu province, apparently,’ I replied. It was about as much as I knew.

‘You know, they very strange up there,’ she said frowning, and then sipped some more tea. ‘Very strange, not really Chinese you know. Gansu, I never been to Gansu, you know, but they not really Chinese there.’

And then I wondered if she had known Jasper Cornelius for so many years, did Mrs Cheung also know why my great uncle had decided to buy an apartment in this particular

location. Out of curiosity I asked her, if there was something specific that had attracted him to this quarter of Hong Kong. Her reply was not at all what I had anticipated.

‘You know, your uncle, he like girls. He like girls a lot, all kind of girls, you know. Before, this area was red light district in Hong Kong for many years. There were five hundred brothels; now, not so many, I think. Your uncle, I think he visit everyone of them.’ She laughed and then her smile returned. I was stuck for words and felt slightly embarrassed by the revelation.

‘I believe that he was also very interested in antiques and this is the quarter where most of the main dealers are located.’ Lucy had clearly noted my shock and perhaps felt obliged to add balance to the story.

Well, I thought, I had just learned another interesting and unknown aspect about the character of my great uncle. Up until that point I had had imagined him as being more of a recluse and a serious art collector, but clearly he had other interests too.

I suppose some colonials in Hong Kong were seduced by opium, or making money by smuggling gold and the like, his passion apparently, after antiques, was girls. I had wondered why he never married. I quickly conjectured that it was a bit like the kitchen, if he wasn’t looking for companionship, which clearly he wasn’t, then everything he needed was down below at street level and, carnal pleasures, like the culinary delights, were equally as extensive and not that expensive.

‘We should formalise the arrangements for Mrs Cheung, Mister Veronesi,’ Lucy brought us back to the present; as always, she seemed to be in a rush. ‘If you’re happy to do that, I will arrange some papers for you to sign this afternoon when you have your meeting with Mr Spooner.’

I nodded still wondering about my great uncle’s passions. How much more difficult he would have found life in England where such things would have been rather frowned on. China and Hong Kong must have been the perfect place for him to conduct his more Bohemian lifestyle.

‘What time is the meeting this afternoon? Remind me, please, Lucy.’

‘It’s at three.’

‘Oh yes. How do I get to the offices from here?’

‘The easiest way probably is to take the Island Line subway. The terminus at Sheung Wan is just near here. You take the MTR as far as Wan Chai. The Commercial Centre is there on the waterfront. It’s near to where we came out of the tunnel this morning. You can’t miss it.’

Well, that gave me a general idea, which was probably good enough to get me to the right neck of the woods.

We chatted with Mrs Cheung for a little longer until Lucy, clearly bored, suddenly jumped up and said that she must leave and more or less forcibly escorted Mrs Cheung out the apartment and into the lift. As she left Mrs Cheung told me that she insisted always on using the lift, even though it sometimes took a long time arriving. She said she never used the stairs because of the pain from her arthritic knees. I sympathised with her. The last thing that she said waiting for the lift doors to close was that I looked very much like my uncle! As the doors slowly rattled together, she waved enthusiastically at me. I waved back.

After they had left, I decided to take my time and explore my new abode as well as some of its more obvious contents.

I started on the ground floor of the apartment passing quickly through the lounge and the dining room with which I was already acquainted. Next to the dining room was a master

bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. Indeed the arrangement on this floor alone would have made quite a spacious one-bedroom flat.

The staircase that led to the second floor went up between the lounge and the dining room and arrived at a kind of landing. The overall floor area was slightly smaller. On one side of the landing was a large library, which led out to a spacious south-facing balcony; on the other side, there were two more bedrooms, as well as another bathroom. Both bedrooms were filled with furniture and crates. The bed in one of the rooms had been made up and I assumed that this was where I was expected to sleep. However, with all the crates and furniture in the room it had more the appearance of the back of an auctioneer's saleroom than a bedroom.

The staircase turned round and then continued up another flight of open stairs to the third floor of the triplex. It arrived in the corner of a large L-shaped living room. Overall, the internal floor area was smaller again and apart from the living room which took up most of the space there was a fourth double bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. Needless to say, like all the other rooms in the apartment, each of the rooms also contained a huge collection of furniture as well as a wide variety of artwork and artefacts and even more crates.

Even from the interior, I could see that the views from the terrace, which extended around two sides of the top floor on the west and the south sides, were impressive. I opened one side of a large sliding patio door and stepped out. What first surprised me was the noise coming up from street level. Secondly, the heat hit me like a brick wall and thirdly, the extent of the luxuriant vegetation around the terrace was impressive. Mrs Cheung clearly liked gardening!

Looking between the adjacent buildings, I could only make out views of more distant buildings. At one time, the sea might have been visible, but the density of the high-rise development between the apartment and the waterfront had now completely hidden it. I imagined that when the apartment block had been built, the views would have been much better. However, little by little, over the years, the building had been thoroughly hemmed in by newer, larger buildings until it was completely overwhelmed and overlooked by new development. Pity, I thought, it would probably affect its value.

* * *

The Hong Kong offices of *G-cubed* were in a new high-rise building, which lent itself to open plan offices and like their offices in London it was much as I imagined it might be, although completely different - modern, high-tech, stainless steel, glass, and sparkling. It was the complete antithesis of their more traditional plush leather and wood panelled office in London. The interior design reflected the high tech architecture and was conceived to underline their brilliance in dealing with all matters concerned with commerce, corporate trade, and property. No doubt they also offered services associated with litigation, family law, and crime, but their biggest earner must have been the developing Chinese market. The partners individual offices and the conference rooms were separate, and located on the north side of the building, out of the sun, and overlooking Victoria Harbour, Kowloon, and the New Territories beyond. The workshop, as you might describe it, the open plan offices were on the south side protected by a system of electrically operated external blinds.

Lucy came to meet me in reception, which was on the tenth floor. She took me up to George Spooner's office on the floor above. George seemed extremely delighted to see me and, from the moment that I entered his domain, he made me feel quite at ease. I had feared that there would be a lot paperwork and that it would be a daunting and exhausting

experience, but George took his time, taking me through all manner of declarations, tax calculations, deeds, employment contracts and the rest, explaining each within its context and pointing out obligations and implications where appropriate. Lucy, whose mobile phone must have been confiscated, made notes, rushed backwards and forwards making photocopies and I, mostly under instruction, signed all manner of documents. Then, before our meeting finished, we discussed the property and its contents. What did I want to do with it? To be honest, I hadn't a clue!

George explained that the property, like most property in Hong Kong, was actually owned on a long lease. There were over fifty years still to run and that a property of this kind, and of this size near to the centre, was extremely rare. However, it was also in a district not so highly prized now and that might affect its resale value.

As I was in no rush to sell and as I didn't need the capital it would realise, I decided to investigate if there might be some long-term advantage of letting the apartment and taking an income from it. I also decided that the most important issue was to probably sell most of the antiques. And of course, as it happened, George Spooner had a contact with Sotheby's and surprisingly, Sotheby's wasn't very far from his office. But then, as I learnt, nowhere is very far in Hong Kong.

'Her name's Samantha Carr, you'll like her,' he said confidently. 'She's an oriental furniture specialist. Would you like me to give her a ring and see if I can arrange an appointment for you.'

I agreed; it seemed like much the simplest thing to do. As it turned out, George was right, Samantha Carr certainly knew her business and I did like her.

Moreover, I did subsequently wonder if I had involved someone else, whether we would have made the discovery that effectively changed my life; in fact, both of our lives for ever. I suppose, without that discovery my destiny would have been different.

Or would it?

Chapter 5

Samantha Carr was spritely; she had brilliant blue eyes, and had almost boyish, short blond hair. She was petite and I immediately found her alluringly attractive. I guess that she was probably in her early to mid-thirties and from the ring on her finger, unfortunately, clearly already spoken for. She told me that she had trained with Sotheby's in London, where she became especially interested in oriental antiquity and had willingly moved to Hong Kong, in the hope of furthering her career. She never mentioned her husband.

I will never forget the look of astonishment on her face when she entered my flat for the first time. In a way, it was not unlike Mrs Cheung's reaction when she saw me; she covered her mouth with her hand; it was the exactly the same gesture. Her eyes sparkled with awe when she saw the objects and furniture in the gallery; she looked almost like a child in a sweet shop and so enchanted with what was laid out before her, that she didn't know where to look next.

Before she even had a chance to take it in I said, 'don't get too excited, there's more through here, and even more on the next two floors. Would you like a tea, or a coffee?'

Her eyes were wide-open taking things in. 'Tea would be great.' She kind of glanced at me, but that was all. Quite clearly, she was still mesmerised by the treasures all around her. 'Earl Grey, if you have it,' she added without really looking in my direction but at least attempting a quick smile out of politeness.

'Have a quick look around, tell me what you think, and then we can discuss perhaps how we should go about selling some of this stuff.'

She nodded and wandered through into the lounge. 'May I look upstairs?'

'Of course, wander wherever you like. I'll call you when the tea has brewed.'

I hadn't been gone long when I heard her startled cry. 'Oh my God!'

I looked out of the kitchen; she was holding one of the vases from the gallery. 'Is it real?' She turned it over to look at the marks on the base. The manoeuvre was quickly followed by another exclamation. 'Wow, it is! Wow, that's really made my day!'

I went back into the kitchen wondering what all the fuss was about and poured the boiling water over the leaves in the strainer in the teapot.

It was interesting; Mrs Cheung had always kept a basic supply of things in the kitchen for my great uncle's return. When it came to their 'best before date,' she took them away and used them, replacing them with new ones. Strange that after seventeen years she was still doing the same thing, I suppose it was simply habit. She never really thought about changing her routine and in any event, it suited her very well.

I took a tray with two cups of tea into the sitting room and placed it on a long, low, intricately carved table, and sat down on one of the settees.

‘Tea’s ready,’ I shouted, and soon heard Samantha descending from the middle floor. ‘How would you like it?’

‘*Au nature*, please, no milk, no sugar.’

I handed her one of the cups.

‘Well, what do you think?’

‘Are you intending to sell everything, most of it, or just a few selected items?’ She sounded breathless.

‘I don’t know, you tell me. Do any of them have any value?’

She sort of gulped. ‘The pair of vases in the hall, probably fifteen to eighteen thousand pounds sterling; on a good day, possibly more.’ She said it without blinking.

‘Just the vases.’ I was genuinely astonished.

‘Each,’ she repeated. ‘They’ll make more as a pair. They are early Qing dynasty, and extremely rare. And that’s just for starters; there are other items here that at first glance are considerably more valuable, probably in the tens of thousands. They should be insured for a sum that’s at least a third more.’

‘I see.’ I’d noticed a similar pair upstairs that were green and gold and wondered if they were also Qing dynasty, and might have a similar value. I didn’t say anything.

‘If you wanted to keep them, have you somewhere where you could display them?’

‘I actually live in a smallish wood and stone chalet in the Italian Alps and quite honestly I don’t see much of this fitting in there. So what’s the best way of progressing this in your opinion, if, for example, I decided to sell most of this collection?’

‘There’s so much of it. We would need to catalogue it first and estimate its value. Most of the items, from a preliminary look, will need to go into specialist sales to attract the best buyers and such sales are only two or three times a year. So, if you were thinking of selling the property, you might also need to think about storage.’

‘Would you do the cataloguing and valuations?’

‘With assistance from some of my colleagues who are more expert in ceramics, ivory and jade, and Chinese landscapes.’

‘Would it take long?’

‘Best part of a week I should imagine from what I’ve seen already. Possibly longer.’

‘Sounds as if you’re going to be busy, then.’

‘Certainly does if you’re happy to proceed with this!’

‘I think so.’ What else would I have done? ‘When can we arrange to start?’

‘I need to check, but I think that we could probably start next week, if that suits you.’

‘I don’t see any problems.’

‘Well, if we say ten, on Monday morning. I’ll come along with a couple of my colleagues and we’ll make a start. I’ll ring you if we need to make any changes, do you have a mobile number I can get you on?’

I gave her the number of my Italian mobile.

She stayed for about another hour. I listened to several more exclamations of surprise and heard some of the furniture being moved around. Then she came down to find me, told me I was sitting on an absolute fortune, and left. I must say that I was sorry to see her go; it was as if a sparkle of life had left with her.

* * *

I spent the next two days and the weekend variously discovering Hong Kong, sampling the exotic cuisine, as well as examining the wide variety of *objets d'art*, antiques, and other curiosities, which filled the second and third floors of the apartment. Unlike my great uncle, however, I didn't try the exotic girls. Perhaps I should have done. However, unlike him, I wouldn't have known where to start! I also thought that if I did, it might become quite addictive, that is if one got the hang of it!

I had been married for a while when I was in England, but it didn't seem to work out very well. I'm certain that we were both to blame, at least to some degree or other. We had met at the School of Architecture, we were in the same year group, we moved in together and, in between having a pretty wild time we helped each other through our intermediates and finals. It was a long course and maybe we should have finished our relationship when the course ended, rather than celebrating our success by marrying. However, it seemed the natural thing to do at the time, and everyone, especially her parents, expected it. We complied happily with their aspirations, we didn't even really think about it. If anything, we thought that it would be a continuation of the fun we'd had at University. But it wasn't.

Being anxious to find jobs and develop our own careers, we found ourselves in an unhealthy and sometimes acrimonious competition. If we could have established our own practice, I suppose it might have worked out, but we desperately needed good practical experience before we did anything like that.

Unfortunately, we ended up working at other ends of London, in two large rival practices, we hardly saw each other, and frankly, I wasn't surprised when Annie, that was her name, came home one day and said that she had found someone more sympathetic and that she was in love. I wouldn't have minded, if she had just told me that she was in love with someone else, it happens; but that he was MORE SYMPATHETIC, really rankled!

The divorce was fairly speedy as these things go, we had no problems with each other until the bloody solicitors got involved and effectively took us both for a ride. We could have settled the affair amicably and equitably, but the solicitors insisted that we should screw each other for as much as possible and then charged us both a fat fee. I suppose it is one way of making money, but it's hardly creative, and it certainly wouldn't suit me; I like to see the concrete result of my endeavours, not tatters!

I had a few casual affairs after that but studiously avoided getting deeply involved again; I really didn't want to go through that business again. Finally, my father's legacy left me enough money to allow me to think about moving to Italy and setting up a practice there. I did some fairly superficial investigation and decided to give it a go. I really felt that I needed to get out of London and do something else.

So far, it was going all right; mostly English speaking clients either wanting extensions to existing chalets, or new chalets in the mountains. And why Italy, you might ask? Well, I'd always been interested in my Italian origins, done courses in Italian in the UK and in Italy, spoke the language reasonably well, and it just seemed like the natural thing to do. A bit like the marriage really and perhaps equally not properly thought through.

I digress.

* * *

By the end of that first weekend in Hong Kong I had a much better idea of the nature of the huge quantity of antiques that I now apparently owned. However, I had already begun to worry about one possible problem I might encounter. If I was asked to provide evidence of the provenance of the vast majority of the items, I doubted that anything existed. As a result,

I surmised that it might prove to be an impediment to selling some of the stuff. For all I knew, and for all anyone else knew, the treasures in the apartment could all be stolen!

The following Monday, Samantha and her two colleagues arrived as we had agreed. They were exactly on time. The doorbell rang, I opened it, and all three stood there looking eager to start work. Samantha introduced Peter Horn first, who was clearly the more senior of her two companions and of English origin although it transpired that he had been born in Hong Kong. Her other colleague was younger, Chinese, and originally from Qingdao on the eastern coast south of Beijing. His name was Li Zun.

Samantha immediately set about by explaining their plan of action. 'I'm going to make a start on the furniture on the ground floor, Peter is going to concentrate on the ceramics on the second floor, and Li is going to look at everything else starting on the third floor.'

I looked at Li and laughed. 'You'll be there for a month!'

'I hope not,' he said, 'Sam told me that she and Peter would help when they've finished their tasks.'

'Good,' I said. 'Let me know when you would like a coffee, or tea, or something else if we have it.'

I let them get on with it, went up to the second floor with Peter and went out on to the balcony with a book and sat in the sun. I suppose I had been there for about half-an-hour when Samantha came up and found me.

'I'd like you to come with me and look at something, if you don't mind. I think it's important.'

'Of course,' I said getting up and following her through the library and downstairs. She took me straight to the entrance hall and the impressive piece of furniture that stood at the end of the gallery.

'Do you know what this is?'

'Not exactly,' I replied, 'although I had imagined that it was some kind of bureau.'

'You're right, it is a kind of bureau,' she said, lowering the centre panel, which was hinged to form a writing surface. 'It's about mid-nineteenth century, so about one hundred and fifty years old. It's got a bit of age to it. It probably stands over two meters tall with that large, swan neck pediment and, as you can see, the doors to the upper part are highly decorated in gold painted images not unlike the scene in the willow leaf pattern. The middle part of the piece is really the bureau. You can see the inset leather writing surface and stacked draws on either side with alcoves for envelopes and the like on either side of this centre piece which comprises two tall, narrow cupboards and two small drawers. And, if you notice carefully, set right in the middle of this arrangement, is this small panel.'

Samantha pointed at the panel on which a monk was depicted carrying a light on a pole and crossing an ornamental bridge over a stream. In the background, there were mountains and stylised trees. The scene was framed and appeared to be viewed through a round window, what is sometimes known as a moon window. Like the other scenes on the cabinet, it had been finely painted in gold, as the others were, and then lacquered. Unlike the other scenes, this moon window appeared to have a wide grill depicted on it. I wondered if it represented something of significance.

'Yes,' I said, 'it's rather nice piece of work, isn't it.'

'It is, but what's interesting about it, is that the panel is not a small cupboard, or a drawer.'

'What is it then?'

‘Well, that’s really the question. You see, many of these pieces of furniture were made with secret compartments. What interests me is, if indeed this is one. And, if it is, if we might find something in it.’

‘I’m intrigued, go on!’

‘Do you mind if I have a poke around?’

‘Of course not, be my guest.’ I could see the sense of adventure in her sparkling eyes. She was on a mission.

‘Normally, there is a catch which keeps the panel closed and normally, it should be operated from the front. You wouldn’t want to move a piece of furniture of this size to get at the back, its so tall and heavy.’

First, she removed the two small drawers on one side and examined the void left by the top one. Then, having no success, she put her hand into the space left by the lower one. She was feeling the inside surface for something. She shook her head and paused to reflect. Interestingly, I noticed that the narrow cupboard on the right was hinged on the right, but the cupboard on the other side was hinged on the left. In design terms it was perfectly acceptable, it was symmetrical, and one was a mirror image of the other.

I was still thinking about it when Samantha suddenly became excited. She had been feeling along the vertical edges of the front panel and had obviously found something.

‘I think this is a Japanese mechanical device, it’s a kind of lock,’ she declared looking increasingly enthusiastic. ‘Look at the horizontal golden grill lines on the design. There are hairline cracks. I think there are three sections here.’ She fiddled with the upper one trying to slide the section to the right and then to the left. It moved, not much, two or three millimetres at the most.

‘Brilliant,’ she said. ‘It’s like one of those Japanese puzzle boxes that were made for export in the 1930’s and later, but the technology of course is a lot older.’

Samantha then tried the flat surface above the panel. That moved also, it came slightly forward, but again it didn’t move very far, but it didn’t deter Samantha, she seemed convinced that she had found the key. Then she slid the middle section the opposite way to the one above it. It also moved. She repeated the process for the flat surface above and that moved slightly further forward again.

‘Getting there,’ she said. Then she slid the lower section to the left like the top section. Then she went back to the flat surface and moved it forward. This time it slid all the way out. ‘Eureka!’

‘Very clever,’ I commented, impressed. I would never have recognised it as a secret compartment in a month of Sundays, never mind opened it.

‘Ingenious isn’t it?’

‘I should say so!’

‘Do you want to put your hand inside and see if there is anything?’

‘I’ll go and get a torch?’

Samantha laughed. ‘Do you think there might be a mouse trap in there?’

‘There might be, or something else equally frightful, you never know!’

I went into the kitchen and opened one of the drawers where I had spotted a small torch when I was exploring the flat. It didn’t have any batteries so I had bought some, thinking they might come in useful. I was right.

Back with Samantha at the bureau, I shone the torch down into the dark void. I could see immediately that there was definitely something hidden in the compartment. ‘What do you think it is?’

‘Difficult to say, it looks as if it might be fragile. We’d better be a bit cautious. I’ll call Li; he’s got some tweezers and gloves.

Li didn’t have much difficulty removing the bundle of papers; and surprisingly, they seemed to be in a reasonably good condition. He laid them on the writing surface and then put his hand back into the compartment and searched around. Then, carefully, he removed another item. It was an envelope; it had a discoloured off-white colour. On the front of the envelope, written in faded brown ink in a flowing bold Victorian hand, was

For the attention of David Veronesi.

Chapter 6

So, my great uncle had clearly anticipated my arrival in his flat as well as being quite aware of my existence, whilst I was hardly conscious of his. Moreover, as I've already recounted, he obviously knew sufficient about me to be content to make me a director of his company!

However, why had he never tried to get in touch with me directly, or at least to inform me of his actions? All I could think was that either it was simply procrastination to the extent that it was finally too late, or that there was some other inexplicable reason why he simply didn't want any direct contact with his family.

So finally, I found it really quite odd to receive a letter from him. Indeed it was more than odd, it was shocking, especially as the letter would actually have been written at least seventeen years earlier. It was rather like a message from the dead. It had an unexpectedly weird effect on me and I must have looked shaken, because Samantha put her hand on my arm delicately and held it gently.

'You've gone pale, Mr Veronesi, are you alright?'

'Yes, I think so; I just wasn't expecting this. Anything else I think I could have dealt with, even a mousetrap, but I must admit that this letter has rather thrown me. It's like a voice from the grave and I find it quite disconcerting. I sincerely hope it's not a codicil to his will disinheriting me and leaving all his worldly goods to a cat's home; I was just beginning to get nicely accustomed to the idea of coming into a bit of money.'

'I should take your time and read it when you're ready. The letter has been hidden there for some years. I doubt that it can be that urgent. And you never know, it might contain something that will turn out to be a fascinating insight into your uncle.'

'It's probably very good advice, Samantha, thank you,' I said, putting the envelope down next to the other papers. 'What about these then - do you have any idea what they are?'

'They look like fairly typical Tibetan Buddhist texts, probably sutras or prayers,' Li replied. 'I would need to do some research to date them though, and find out what they represent. I suspect that if they are authentic then they might be quite ancient.'

The papers were piled together in a loose bundle. The sheets of paper were narrow, about ten or twelve centimetres wide or so, and well over thirty centimetres long when laid out. On each sheet, there were six neat lines of text. They ran all the way across the page and then each sheet had been folded in half along its length. The paper had yellowed significantly and although it appeared rather fragile, it wasn't. The ink had obviously faded in some places but despite this, overall they seemed to be in quite a reasonable condition.

'When you say quite ancient, what do you mean, Li, the last century?'

'No, probably much older than that - several hundreds of years, at least.'

'I suppose it would be helpful if we knew where they came from,' I said.

'It's a good point,' Samantha added. 'In fact, it's something you must do. You need to check through all of your uncle's files to see if you can find any invoices, or receipts, for anything in his collection. It's important in establishing provenance and possibly ownership.'

'Yes, that had already crossed my mind. I'll see what I can do.'

I left them to it again, went back to my place in the sun on the balcony, and took my letter with me. I hesitated before I opened it - it had the potential to be nothing at all, details of bank accounts or contacts, or it might be like Pandora's box, or indeed, anywhere between the two.

Of course, curiosity eventually got the better of me and with some trepidation and excitement I carefully opened the envelope. Inside, there was just one, folded, hand written sheet of paper. I extracted it with great care and looked at it for a moment before opening it.

Hong Kong 21st May 1980

David,

You will no doubt be somewhat surprised to be hearing from me especially as we never had the opportunity to meet. As you will no doubt appreciate, I was never much of a family person; indeed, I systematically shunned any contact with the family.

However, now, as I am rapidly approaching my end, I have a service that I must ask of you. This may seem rather strange, for it is clearly a task that someone else could do. I am aware of course that in choosing this particular way to communicate with you I am also running the risk that this letter and the accompanying papers may never reach you and may remain undiscovered for centuries. So be it. Fate, you may discover, has a way of deciding these things regardless of our intervention. It is a lesson that I have learnt very late in life.

It is imperative that the Buddhist Scriptures, which were in my safe keeping and concealed with this letter, are returned to the monastery at Dunhuang. I was instructed that this is a task that only you should undertake. There is a reason for this, which is much too lengthy to explain in this letter, but which, you will find, will be explained to you in due course. On this matter alone, you need to have complete confidence in me.

I know China and I know the Chinese well and so I am also conscious that a political situation may evolve to make a journey to Dunhuang difficult, or even perhaps, dangerous. Ultimately, only you will be able to decide if it is possible to undertake this errand, or whether it would be more prudent to abandon the whole idea. I really cannot advise you. However, as I have already stated, fate has a way of deciding these matters, much more, I cannot tell you.

I honestly sincerely regret now that we never had an opportunity to meet, but there it is. It clearly wasn't our destiny to do so, and destiny, you will find, is an interesting phenomena!

Good luck David.

*Your great uncle,
Jasper Cornelius*

I wandered what he meant when he referred to destiny. He clearly had something in mind.....

..... **now read on**