

SOLVE ET COAGULA

My death was quite sudden. Needless to say it took me completely by surprise. Not as all as I'd planned it either. I'd planned to go gracefully, with the kids standing round the bed perhaps – that way there'd be no problems with the legalities. Plenty of witnesses.

Oh, and I'd have been a good deal older.

Instead, here I am at just 27 lying in a wooden box waiting to be cremated.

Cremated for God's sake. As if I'd ever go for a cremation. Burial's a damned site safer.

And, note this well, I'm starting to feel angry. That's good. Still, a good few hours to go yet. Plenty of time. Shit. Who am I trying to fool? It's touch and go and don't I know it. No time for the usual plans. God, I hope the lawyers have found out.

That's a point, the lawyers. What day is it? Will any of the over-priced bastards actually be in the office?

No, come on, calm down now. Think it through. Let's see if I can figure out the timing.

It was Thursday, I'm sure of that at least, aren't I? Yes. Thursday. I'd been reviewing my investments. Stocks were down, so I'd shifted some of my assets into gold – always reliable gold. And I'd offloaded a bit of my secret bullion to cover the next six month's expenses. Of course, short notice, secret (and highly illegal) gold sales never get the best price. Nevertheless, you *can* always rely on gold. And the new gold, oil, of course – but we'll see how long that will last. As an afterthought,

I'd shifted some of the Swiss funds into oil. Not too easy these days with all the regulators around the world keeping an eye on things.

I'd have smiled if my body would have responded. Every time I'm reminded of the regulators I remember my trial. Thank God they'd caught up with me in Africa. Still a civilised custom of official bribery there. It helps to see that justice is done. Still, I came within a whisker of doing ten years. Insider trading, or gossip, as we used to call it. How can gossip be illegal? Ah, well, you've got to move with the times as my father used to say.

God, I hate a wandering mind. The mind should be my tool, not my master. Back to Thursday.

I'd made the calls - I still don't trust the internet. Stockbroker, three or four banks, and a couple of well placed crooks to shift the bullion. Lucky I'd managed to make so many contacts really. But I'd guessed this was going to be an unstable decade. And there's always gold.

My private line had rung.

"Hi," it was James, "Is it alright to come over?"

"What sort of time James, I'm in the middle of a few things?"

"Now OK? You'll want to see this, I promise."

So I'd said OK. Thing with James is he gets a bit enthusiastic – often about trivial stuff. But he'd come through occasionally like with the da Vinci that had "disappeared" from the gallery a couple of weeks before he rang me. He'd learned my tastes.

I'd grabbed a shower and changed. You've got to look the part for these dealers.

They can be as useful for their contacts as for their wares. Remember that- it may

just save your life one day. Cultivate dealers. Especially in Europe. It's even worth learning a few languages so they can't hoodwink you when calling folk on your behalf.

James was nothing if not punctual. And dapper, although the gloves he habitually wore could be irritating.

The gloves! Christ. The gloves. How many times had he been round to the flat?

Nine or ten? And never even a fingerprint. James isn't bright enough to have pulled this one off is he? But he'd got the da Vinci hadn't he?

It had been a brief meeting. I'd mixed him a drink – some vile cocktail he loved- and even joined him in it. Appearances remember?

“How's Jennifer?” he'd asked.

“Seemed OK when I spoke to her last. She's off in Europe on a buying trip.” Hence the bullion sale I'd thought.

I sipped the disgusting drink, trying (and I might say, succeeding) not to show my distaste.

Come to think of it now, I'd never really *liked* him.

“Give her my regards next time she calls.”

I nodded assent.

“What have you got for me then?”

He'd produced a small, ornate, ivory box from his briefcase (calf skin – poseur), and handed it over. It looked like a run of the mill antique – nothing to create a fuss about. I'd raised my eyebrows.

“Open it.” was all he'd said.

Well, I had. Another sip and a careful glance to see how much of the vile stuff was left. The box contained a small broach.

It had been about as much of a shock as dying. I'd felt the blood drain from my face, and my hands start to tremble as I'd picked it up to examine the back. James was talking, but I didn't take much of it in at the time. After all, I knew didn't I? I couldn't have mistaken *that* broach.

"I've got full provenance," he was saying, "fifteenth century Italian. Made for a wine merchant in Rome....."

Yes, my father. The engraving on the back confirmed it. Did I tell you I was 27?

Well, I lied. That's 27 in this identity. Truth is I'm 527 give or take a decade.

".....seems he gambled, or pawned it a few months before he died. I've got all the records here."

James was reaching for his briefcase when he'd glanced at my face.

"Are you OK?"

Damn! Of course, I'm wasn't OK, and I shouldn't be letting the likes of James know it.

He'd poured me a drink. Bourbon. Honest whisky. A taste I'd picked up in the US, oh, 150 years ago. Oh God. *He'd fixed me* a drink. It had to be James.

I wonder what he'd used. Most poisons don't kill me. That's just one of the benefits of the elixir. Of life that is. But some of them come close. That's why I'm fussy who pours my drinks. Most of the good ones work well in alcohol.

I don't remember much after that. Papa's broach (he'd always been ostentatious).

James fussing. Me feeling a bit off colour – at the time I'd thought it was shock. No,

it's all vague. Was James talking to someone? The perspective of the scene in my flat was a bit weird. I must have collapsed. He was on the phone – an ambulance perhaps?

So, it was Thursday then. How long to get a disposal order for my body in this country? If he'd used the right stuff I'd certainly *appear* dead.

I need to calm down. I'm missing something.

AUTOPSY. There'd have to have been an autopsy. Governments like to poke around in your business even when you're dead. But if there'd been an autopsy I would be dead. Elixirs can only do so much. Perhaps I'm in the morgue now....no, this feels like a coffin. Over the centuries, I've been in enough to know . Especially this last couple of centuries when just saying who you were stopped counting. You need papers just to tell *yourself* who you are these days.

The bastard's got clout then. Or is he working for someone else? Who? And where did I get the impression I was waiting for a cremation? Snatches of half heard conversation perhaps?

What's that noise? Someone's opening the coffin. If I can just open my eyes they might realise some thing's wrong.

“Hello Tim.”

Tim? Tim? Oh yes, that's me this time around. Tim King. Best I could do on short notice last time I switched. I never got round to deed poll.

It was James's voice.

“Can you hear me Tim?”

Why would he ask that? To him I'm dead aren't I? Poisoned, the bastard.

"Hello love."

Jennifer! Jennifer here too.

I put all my effort into it. I need to see them. My eyes open. James and Jennifer, my lovely wife, are looking down on me.

"It's wearing off then." James said.

"Don't try and talk," Jennifer said. "There's something we need you to know."

James smiled, then she continued.

"We're at a crematorium, and you're toast in half an hour." She smiled.

That anger again. Full blooded this time. The poison really was wearing off.

Another ten minutes or so and I'll be out of this box and after them with a vengeance.

"Just tell him, then we can go."

So, James was nervous. Didn't want to get caught here eh?

She shot him a look, and continued. I'll bet she didn't see his expression when she turned away. Who was using who?

"I cracked the combination on your box at the bank. I bet you never realised I'd found out about it. All your records in once place. Careless."

Not all, I thought. But no one knew about that box. They couldn't. Well, I'd always thought I couldn't be that wrong.

"You'll be wondering how I found it. Sloppiness Tim. A letter from the bank. Only partly shredded when the machine packed in. I read it while you looked for a screwdriver, remember? Anyway, I checked the box out, and now I know who you really are, you bastard. I didn't believe it at first, but the papers led me to your

lab.....And your diary.”

Why is she so angry? There's nothing in the papers that could upset her, except for my real identity. And I *can* move the fingers of my left hand.

“I never told you about my family, did I love. You know I've been tracing their history. Some of them knew you, all those years ago.”

“Get a move on.” They exchanged looks. James is really getting spooked. I could probably move my arm. Five more minutes you bastards.

“17th Century England – remember it?”

Of course I did. My lowest deed.

“The village riot? What you did? What you did to my family?” There was a tear in her eye.

The militia. I'd sent them in. It was expected. And boy, were they enthusiastic.

We'd thought no one had survived. Could there really have been some of her family there? I suppose there must have been. Sickened, I'd changed my name and moved on. Naples I seem to remember.

“Well, it's payback time love,” she spat the last word. “James.”

I can move my feet.

James leant over me smiling. He is enjoying this. I felt a small prick in my arm. The rising energy drained from me, and my eyes closed.

They're putting the coffin lid back on, I can hear it. Two words are ringing in my ears.

“Burn bastard.”