

FROM THE CURIOSI CASEBOOK

-PROJECTION POINT-

Venice, Italy

June 1992

PART ONE

After landing at Marco Polo airport I took the ferry and we were already plowing through the blue green waters toward Venice by the time I entered the cabin. There was plenty of space on the benches, so I picked a spot on the port side behind a German couple that were seated across the aisle from their two young sons. The only other passenger was a hefty American who sat directly behind the boys. He had a map of Venice spread out on his lap and held it in place with his left hand while his right hand gripped a worn leather briefcase resting next to him. I had been to Venice several times, but each time was like the first time and I still didn't know my way around.

I took a deep breath of the salty sea air blown in through the window that one of the boys had opened. As we approached the Island of the Dead a half dozen pallbearers were hoisting a coffin from a flower-laden gondola. The two boys fought to see who could get the best view of the coffin. Death was only a rumor for them. The older and bigger one finally shoved his kid brother away from the window, so he could get a better view. As the child skidded across the seat and was about to bounce onto the floor his father grabbed him like he was fielding a line drive and handed him to the mother. Then the father pried the older boy loose from the window. Spray shot through the open window and plastered the American. His face dripping, he leaned forward, across the empty space and closed the window. The map on his lap slid to the floor. I picked it up and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he said. "I figure this map will come in mighty handy. From what I've heard you can get lost in Venice quicker than a penny and I'm pretty much a penny pincher." He spoke with an accent that reminded me of cowboys and he pointed a thick finger toward the bow of the boat at Venice floating on the horizon. "By golly that's like seeing the front range of the Rocky Mountains from the Great Plains."

I'd only seen the Rockies from the window of a plane flying over them on the way to California. They didn't seem real looking down at them from thirty thousand feet. Neither did Venice from a boat at sea level.

-2-

It was a small hotel but unlike the one in Sarajevo where I'd recently spent a lot longer than I'd intended, the Hotel Alto hadn't been whittled down by war. When I checked in the desk clerk informed me that the bill had been taken care of and gave me a note from Signor Bassantino.

After taking the tiny elevator to my room I tossed my bag on the bed and took the stairs down to the wine bar next to the hotel's restaurant. The wine bar was small and windowless with a barrel ceiling of thick stone and a damp coolness that was probably good for the wine. It reminded me of the cellar of the hotel in Sarajevo. That one didn't have booze or food but since it was also the bomb shelter it was standing room only whenever I was there as opposed to here where I was the only customer inside. I took my glass of wine and went outside into the sunlight.

"Signor Flynn?"

I looked at the dapper man in the white linen suit sitting at one of the half dozen small marble top tables outside the entrance to the wine bar.

"Signor Bassantino?" I asked as I walked up to him

He stood and replied. "Si but call me Ugo."

"Dante," I said as we shook hands.

"Such a name. I wish my father had been as literary when it came to mine."

I took the seat beside him, where I could sit with my back to the wall and see the canal. On the other side of the canal a wooden rowboat was tied to an iron ring set into a brick wall. Cut into the wall above the ring was a heavy wooden door and on either side of the door there were two windows and above the windows were two more floors, each with five windows. The door was closed and all of the windows were shuttered. It felt safe enough so I looked at Ugo who had raised his glass in a toast.

"I was named after my maternal grandfather, who immigrated to America from Italy. He was the literary one."

"Let me be the first to welcome you back to your ancestral home."

"I've lived in Italy for fifteen years."

"Of course, I know that. You live in Rome so that is why we have not met before even though you have worked for us several times. I meant to welcome you back from your recent trip to Yugoslavia."

"From what I saw Yugoslavia no longer exists. Some people say it never did, that it only existed in the mind of Marshall Tito."

"In any case, I imagine it was not a pleasant experience for you."

"At least I got out." I sipped the wine. It was a Brunello. My first glass of good wine since I'd left Italy two months ago to cover a war that I thought would be over in two weeks. "By the

way, thanks for arranging to get me out. I know you, the Curiosi, have some pull but how you were able to get me a ride in one of the military convoys that made it out of Sarajevo.”

He held up his hands as if it were nothing. “We did not want you to miss your assignment for us. It was not as if you could call for a taxi or hitch hike.”

I looked at the calm waters of the canal only a few meters away. One of the shutters opened on the top floor. It was the middle window. A man wearing a crisp white shirt leaned on the sill, a cigarette in his right hand aimed at a young woman in a tight black skirt and long black hair who walked toward us on our side of the canal. Although she was wearing stiletto heels she managed to miss the cracks in the stone without looking. Trailing her by a couple of meters was a black gondola, its gondolier stirring his pole in the thick water.

“Speaking of hitching, the first time I was in Yugoslavia, or what was then called Yugoslavia, I was hitch hiking with a Swedish girl I’d met at a Youth Hostel in Vienna. The deal between us was that she would stand by the side of the road and get us the rides and I would protect her from the driver. It was strictly utilitarian on her part. She needed to get to Dubrovnik where she was going to meet up with some guy she knew who had a yacht and they and some friends were going to sail down to the Greek Islands. I wasn’t invited for that part. In any case, it meant that I had to sit in the front seat while she sat in the back out of the driver’s reach. Of course, the guys who picked us up weren’t interested in me so the drivers were looking at her in the back seat instead of at the road in front of us as we’re going down the Dalmatian coast on that narrow two lane with nothing but curves and rocky cliffs. Still, that first time hitching into Yugoslavia wasn’t as scary as the ride I just took out of there inside an armored personnel carrier.”

I took another sip of wine and looked at the woman in the stiletto heels as she turned and stepped onto the bridge over the canal. She was walking slowly, her hips swayed and her dark hair rustled in the breeze. The man in the window leaned over the sill, cocking his right elbow, tracking her with the red tip of his cigarette. The woman looked up and then down at the gondola and began to lose her balance. She grabbed the railing and steadied herself. Once back on her heels she released her grip and continued across the bridge, the trailing fingers of her left hand stroking the iron railing just as the high prow of the gondola approached. The gondolier looked to the left as the woman reached the far side then quickly ducked his head just as the gondola entered the darkness under the bridge. The man in the window flicked his cigarette into the canal where the gondola had been and closed the shutters.

“Buon Giorno.” The voice boomed and red wine spilled out of my glass onto the white marble table top before I steadied my hand. I looked up at a guy in his early twenties with a tanned, relaxed face that wore a relaxed smile and an expensive pair of sunglasses.

“Nicolo,” Ugo answered. “This is Signor Dante Flynn.”

Nicolo slid into the empty chair next to me and shook my hand. “It is a great pleasure to meet you Signor Flynn.”

“Just call me Dante.”

“A good name.”

“So, I’ve been told.”

“Nicolo is going to take you to the meeting with the people whose case you’ll be writing about for us.”

-3-

“You had no problem finding your hotel?” Nicolo asked me after Ugo said goodbye and walked off over the same bridge as the girl with the stiletto heels.

“I took one of the boats from the airport to St. Marks where I caught a water taxi. I’ve been to Venice before but I can’t say where we are exactly other than we’re not that far from the Grand Canal.”

He gave me a smile that looked as comfortable on him as his sunglasses. “You are correct, but, of course, everything in Venice is not far from the Grand Canal.”

“I guess not since it cuts Venice in half, doesn’t it?”

“More or less, but neither side feels they get the lesser half. However, the Grand Canal curves like a snake so that at any particular point it is not easy for someone who is not familiar with Venice to know exactly where they are relative to the Grand Canal.”

“So which direction is it?”

He looked both ways, his hands on his hips as he swiveled his torso. Finally, he pointed to the right, past the arched bridge in the direction the gondola had taken. “It is that direction.”

“For a second there I thought you didn’t know where we were either.”

He laughed. “I had to think because since we are an island it can also be reached by going in the opposite direction, as well.” He pivoted and pointed the other way. “You see if you go that direction when you reach the water, which is the Giudecca Canal, then you can go in either direction and you will eventually arrive at the Grand Canal. If you know that then you will never be lost in Venice, at least not forever.” He stopped as if he wanted to give me time for this to sink in, and then asked me if I liked the hotel.

I told him that I did. “This part of Venice, wherever it is, seems very quiet. In fact, just before you arrived I was thinking how peaceful it was.”

“You want peace?”

“I just came from Sarajevo so a little bit of peace goes a long way.”

“Then you are in the right place, because this fondamenta is especially quiet.”

“Fondamenta? I thought the streets that ran next to the canals were called rivas?”

He shook his head and answered. “It is a common mistake. However, riva is a street that runs along a much larger canal than this or the Lagoon.”

“What do they call a street that isn’t next to a canal?”

“A calle, or a calleta if it is a narrow calle, unless it is lined with shops, in which case it is a ruga or a main street, which is a salizada or if it is a covered passage, which is called a sotoportego. Then there is the ramo, which is a street that ends at a canal and, of course, there is the rio terra, or river of earth, which is the name for a canal that has been drained and filled in so that you can now walk on it. For those who give up trying to understand which is which they are all called a riva derci.”

After I finished laughing at his joke, another thing I hadn’t done much of for quite awhile, he added. “Speaking of Rio Terras, my favorite name is the one called *Filled In Canal of Thoughts*.”

“Does that mean it’s a canal that is filled with thoughts or a canal where all thought has been covered up?”

“Perhaps both. Although we Venetians never cover up our thoughts completely we disguise them very well. Of course, most of our canals are full of water. In fact, Venice has 177 of them and their total length is more than 45 kilometers. The Grand Canal, alone, is 3 kilometers long. It is 90 meters at its widest and 3 meters at its narrowest where it flows under the Rialto Bridge. Coincidentally, the average width of all of the canals is only 3 meters.” As he spoke we continued walking. I noticed that his torso hardly moved as if he was in a gondola gliding along beside me while I bounced up and down on the riva’s uneven stones.

“The Rialto,” he continued. “Was named after the Rivo Alto because in the beginning the Lagoon that surrounds us was all mud and the Rivo Alto was one of three rivers that ran through it. We Venetians kept building on this mud until we constructed an island, which is Venice. At that point the Rivo Alto was no longer a river so it became the Grand Canal. Now it flows only with the tide.” He stopped and looked at me to see if any of these facts had sunk in.

“In other words, Venice was created from mud like Adam in the Bible?”

He put his hand on my shoulder and smiled. “Ah, that is a very good. I will use that in the future when I give a tour; with your permission, of course.”

“If anyone asks just tell them you got it from a source who wishes to remain anonymous.”

After walking for a short while more Nicolo pointed across the canal. There were several black gondolas nestled on a stone ramp in front of a two-story wooden structure with wide double doors that made it look like a barn. “You see that building over there? It is a Squeri, which is a boatyard where they build and repair gondolas. Although gondolas are very strong with eight different woods, they must be scraped and tarred once a month or they will rot and then you are in big trouble. Of course, we could use metal or fiberglass or some other synthetic material but then they would not be true gondolas. Gondolas have changed very little in the thousand years since they were introduced to Venice. They came originally from Turkey, just like the body of St. Mark. At one time there were as many as ten thousand but now there are only a few hundred so we must take care of those we still have. It is very sad that there are so few. Most of the gondoliers come from families who have passed the trade down from generation to generation but the young people today they only want to go fast.” He moved his right hand quickly through the air at a forty-five-degree angle, making it clear that he didn't include himself. “Very sad because if it continues we will not have enough for the traghetto.”

“Isn't that the name for the gondola's that are used as ferries?”

“No, that is a Traghetto? The Traghetto is the cooperative organization that every gondolier must join, although each gondola is privately owned. The traghetto is a guild that protects the rights of the gondoliers as well as the tradition.” He added solemnly. “Every gondolier is like a brother.”

“Are women gondoliers your sisters?”

“We don't have any women gondoliers,” he laughed. “Perhaps it is because we treat our sisters much better than we do our brothers.”

As we crossed the canal on a humped back bridge my shoes slipped on stones worn icy smooth from the glacial rub of centuries of soles. An elderly American walked from the other direction up the incline, gripping the wrought iron handrail with one hand and clutching a map with the other. He stopped, rested heavily against the railing, and waved at us as with the unfolded map. Nicolo switched from Italian to near perfect English as he asked if he could be of assistance.

The man thrust the map at Nicolo. “How does anyone find their way around this place? It's like being in a corkscrew.”

Nicolo took the map and spread it out on the railing of the bridge and politely asked the man. “Where is it that you wish to go?”

“A place called the Academy. My wife and the rest of the tour are there already. They took a boat but I wanted a break. It's mostly women, you know. Anyway, I figured I could walk it with no problem since I play golf everyday back in Boca Raton, that's in Florida- in the USA- but this map is about as helpful as a plate of spaghetti. In fact, it's just like looking at plate of spaghetti.”

Nicolo listened patiently before responding. “The place you are looking for is the Accademia, where many of the works of our most famous artists are on exhibit.”

“You mean it’s another damn museum? I was hoping it might be your naval academy, this being Venice. I was in the U.S. Navy, myself.”

“I am afraid Venice no longer has its own navy, Signor. But, the good news for you is that there is a very nice bar opposite the entrance that overlooks the Grand Canal where you can look at the boats as they go by. You see it is right here,” Nicolo pointed to a spot on the map. “It is not far from here.”

The man bent down and looked at the map. “You say that’s close, huh? But where exactly am I right now?” He looked around, gripping the rail of the bridge as he straightened himself.

Nicolo traced a line with his finger on the map as he answered. “You are right here on this bridge. Now, first, you must continue across this bridge and then you turn right at the first street and you continue on that street until you come to a little square where there is a restaurant and then you turn left. You must go on that street until you cross another canal and then you turn left and follow the canal for a short distance until you reach the Accademia. You see, it is very simple.”

“Simple? Maybe to someone who’s done it a million times,” the man said. “Anyway, you say there’s a bar next to it where I can at least look at boats instead of art?”

“Absolutely, the bar you cannot miss.”

“Thanks - grazie, I mean.” The man said as he made his way down the opposite side of the bridge, holding the map in front of him and still gripping the railing with the other.

-4-

A few minutes later we turned our back on the canal we had been following. In front of us was a passageway between two palazzos. “Now, this is a calle,” he announced. “As I told you earlier, a Calletto would be much narrower and also, it would be darker. In fact, there is one named *The Alley of the Blind* because it is so dark you must use your hands to guide yourself and there is another one that is only a meter wide.” He held his hands apart, adjusting the distance until he was satisfied that it approximated a meter, which didn’t seem much narrower than the one we were about to enter. “You cannot allow yourself to get fat or you will get stuck in one of these tight spaces.”

“They must call it the Venetian diet,” I said as I followed him into the calle whose walls seemed on the verge of collapse. A few minutes later when the calle opened onto a broad sunlit plaza I suddenly felt exposed and had to fight the urge to duck back into the safety of the trench we’d just left.

“This is one of my favorite Campos,” Nicolo told me. “Because of the trees, which are very rare in Venice.”

I just stared as he spoke until everything came safely into focus: The trees next to the fountain in the center, the buildings with the shuttered windows and weathered stucco and benign cracks with brick peeking through and the cafes that spread out along the edges of the campo with people sitting and reading or talking and sipping wine or espresso while others walked across the broad, sun bleached stones, through the filigree shadow net cast by the trees before disappearing into one of the passages.

“Is something wrong?” Nicolo finally asked.

“Not a thing,” I answered. “It’s just that the trees and all the calles opening off the campo reminded me of the passage in Dante’s *Inferno* where he wrote of waking up in the middle of his life in a dark woods and not knowing which path to take to get out.”

Nicolo sighed. “Yes, I can see what you mean. Fortunately, Dante had no trouble finding his way out of Venice.”

“Didn’t he escape entirely because he died of something he contracted during his stay,” I answered with a slightly forced laugh as I stepped gingerly into the campo. As we approached the trees a small dog ran toward me barking followed by an elderly woman dressed in black who yanked on his leash snapping the dog back onto his hind legs. The dog turned to look at her and then resumed his attack, dragging the frail woman. Nicolo had already disappeared into one of the calles on the far side so I took off in a fast trot in the same direction with the dog yapping behind me. When I got to the entrance to the calle it was deserted. I continued at a jog for several meters when suddenly I was grabbed and pulled through a cleft in the wall.

“I think we have escaped from the little dog from hell,” Nicolo whispered as he let go of my arm.

“I hope that doesn’t mean this is the gate to hell.”

“No, this is a *sotoportego*, which is a covered passageway.”

I followed him through the dark tunnel until we came out into the daylight. Directly in front of us was a canal with a gondola moored to an iron ring in the *fondamenta*. The *fondamenta* followed the canal for only a few meters before it reached a dead end at a bridge.

“This must be a *ramo* since it dead ends at a canal,” I said. “Unless this is really the River Styx and that’s the boat they use to row you across, which means you were lying to me about us not being in the gate to hell.”

Nicolo laughed again. “No, you are correct that this is a *ramo*. This canal empties into the Grand Canal just beyond that opening.” He pointed to the slot in the stone and stucco walls beyond the arched bridge that ended at the massive door of a palazzo.

“So, we use the gondola to get to the Grand Canal?”

“No, our destination is the Scuola di San Dismas, that palazzo on the other side of this bridge.”

“St. Dismas? Isn't he the patron saint for thieves?”

“You are correct. He was the good thief who was hung on the cross next to Jesus. Although the Bible doesn't give his name the Greek word for dying is dysme. Not that I can personally verify that since the only words in Greek I know I picked up while on holiday in Greece and none of them have to do with dying. However, it does not really matter because the Scuola is not named for St. Dismas because he was a thief, but because he is also the patron saint of antiquaries and the Scuola was established as a confraternity for antiquarians. Of course, the confraternity is a secret organization so it isn't on any maps and there is no sign outside.”

By now we had crossed the bridge and were at the massive door, which had a large black metal knocker shaped like a raven. Nicolo rapped the beak against the door several times then we waited a minute or so before it slowly swung open. Standing in the doorway was a man with thick hair in the same shade of gray as his bushy eyebrows. He wore a dark blue suit whose coat was unbuttoned, having lost its struggle to contain his barrel chest and broad shoulders.

“This is my grandfather, Emilio. He will take you to meet the Dotorre,” Nicolo said and then sat down at a small desk with a black rotary telephone on it.

-5-

“Buon Giorno, Signor Dante Flynn.” A slim, balding man with a black goatee trimmed to a dagger point greeted me after Emilio ushered through a door with the name Map Room in Italian engraved in brass next to its door. “I am Doctor Federico Presti, “May I introduce you to Signor Harold Bunch, who also just arrived in Venice.” Before Federico could finish the introduction, the man grabbed my hand and pumped it enthusiastically. “Why we already know each other, Fred. We both took the same slow boat to Venice from the airport. I have to admit I was tempted to take one of those speedboat taxis they've got here instead.”

“Motoscafos,” Federico corrected him.

“Whatever you fellows call them. They remind me of the speedboat that the Hardy Boys had.” Harry said, as he sat down in a straight back chair, which looked too frail to support him.

“The Hardy Boys?” Federico asked.

“The Hardy Boys,” I answered sitting down carefully in one of the other antique chairs. “Were the main characters in a series of mystery books. They were two teenagers who were amateur detective and had a motorboat, a sports car and motorcycles.”

“I don't remember the motorcycles,” Harry says. “I just remember the speedboat in the *Clue In The Embers*. That was my favorite book as a kid because it had a map of buried treasure. If you

don't mind me being nosy but how did a kid who read the Hardy Boys end up with a name like Dante?"

"From growing up in a home where everyone spoke Italian. My mom's family immigrated to the U.S. from Italy where my grandfather was a professor of literature and studied Dante. He also hated Mussolini and that's why they had to get out of Italy. Anyway, after my parents were married they lived in the same house as my grandparents and didn't move out even when they had kids. We spoke Italian around the house, except my dad, but he was a cop and wasn't around much anyway. All his brothers were cops as well. They were also Irish as you probably noticed from my last name. His parents kept their complete collection of Hardy Boys books in the attic and I read them all."

"I guess we're sort of like the Hardy Boys on this assignment, aren't we?" Harry said.

"I don't think Signora Evesham would want to be referred to as a hearty boy," Federico said.

Harry laughed. "It's Hardy, not hearty, Fred. She can be Nancy Drew, she was a girl detective who had her own series of books."

Federico gave us a look that told us he wanted to change the subject to something more serious than teenage detectives. Instead of joining us in one of the chairs he walked over to the massive wooden library table that faced us. Resting on one end of the table was a globe and on the other a bust of a noble Roman that was missing its left ear. Next to the bust was a black telephone similar to the one on Emilio's desk. Against the walls were wooden bookcases that rose to the ceiling as well as framed maps and paintings that with gods and goddesses, nymphs and satyrs cavorting in the woods or dancing among Roman or Greek ruins. Scattered around the room were Greco Roman statues and busts on pedestals. Like the nobleman on the table each seemed to be missing some piece of their anatomy.

"Some digs, huh?" Harry observed looking around. "The room that they put me in is just a tad smaller than this one. Good thing it doesn't have a painting on the ceiling like the one up there." I followed his eyes to the painting fastened to the ceiling. It depicted a group of men dressed in Renaissance garb seated in several tiers of concentric circles looking down on us. "Because, to tell you the truth, there's no way I'd be able to sleep with those guys staring down at me."

"Those guys, as you call them, were all leading members of the Scuola in the middle of the sixteenth century," Federico said. "In fact, the man sitting in the top row with the red hat was the painter."

"Don't they make you nervous looking down at you like that?" Harry asked.

"Not really. Sometimes I even ask them for their advice."

"Do they ever give it?" Harry asked.

Federico decided not to answer and, instead, told us that before we met Signora Evesham he wanted to give us some historical background concerning geography and cartography. “I think it will be helpful since our investigation involves those subjects.”

“Let her rip, Fred,” Harry said, settling into his chair as if it were a Lazy Boy. “You’re the dottore.”

“Thank you, Harold,” Federico answered. “Although dottore is an honorific that is used in Italy and doesn’t necessarily mean one has a doctoral degree, I do in fact have a PhD in Geography.”

“That makes you a doctor dottore,” Harry bellowed, twirling the toe of one of his cowboy boots. “and in Geography of all things. By golly I am impressed. All I know about maps is what I learned in the Boy Scouts.”

Federico turned to the old men staring down from above then began his lecture. “Geography as a discipline evolved from astronomy.”

Harry immediately interrupted. “I would have thought it would have been the other way around.”

“Then you would be wrong because mapping the stars enabled man to map the world, allowing him to determine where he was at any particular time by plotting it in relationship to the heavens. The earliest practitioners were the Greeks but, he pointed out, that may only be because they left a written record. Whatever the reason, Pythagoras deduced the earth was round and Aristarchus claimed the earth rotated almost 2000 years before Copernicus. In the first century Strabo wrote a book called *Geography* in which he estimated the earth’s circumference to be 18,000 miles. That turned out to come up 7,000 miles short but it was a pretty good estimate given that most people had not ventured beyond the Mediterranean. Then Claudius Ptolemy came along in the 2nd century and wrote his eighth book *Geographia*, the only atlas of the world to survive for the next thousand years. Apparently, nothing was known about Ptolemy except that he knew his math and astronomy and his way around a library. Whether he was an original thinker or passing on what he’d heard from others we will never know, but *Geographia* separated the earth from the heavens and gave us geography and cartography.”

“Sounds like it’s some sort of spiritual activity the way you put it Fred.” Harry said.

“I wouldn’t say spiritual, Harold, this is science after all.” Federico walked over to the globe on the table where he paused to look at it as if it were a crystal ball and pointed to the top and then the bottom. “Now, Ptolemy was the one who proposed that all maps have north on the top and south on the bottom. No doubt he proposed this because most of the known world at that time was north of the equator. He also gave us what was called the orthographic projection in which the round earth can be converted to a map on a flat surface,” he cradled the globe momentarily in his hands then picked up a map that had been lying unseen on the table, and held it for us to see like a magician who had conjured something out of thin air. “You see he subdivided the surface into parallels running east and west that form latitudes and meridians that run north and south to form longitude, each with the 360 degrees of the circle. With this you could begin to know where you were, or where anything was on earth, if you knew your position in the heavens using stars

and sun. Another innovation of his were scales so that the map of the world can be subdivided into areas that can be mapped in more detail and still fit into the larger map and, finally, he gave us a method of illustrating features on a map, what are call hachures.”

Federico put down the map and, in solemn voice, recounted how the dark ages arrived and brought back the flat world. Latitude and longitude were replaced by images of devils and dragons and all sorts of fantastic beasts and serpents. He illustrated this period by walking over to one of the maps on the walls and pointing at a square world surrounded by water with a border of grotesque creatures in menacing poses. In one corner was the Biblical land of the evil tribe Gob and Magog, he told us, and in the upper right-hand corner was paradise. In between was the fictitious Christian realm of the Prester John. “Although some adventurers claimed to have reached paradise Pope Innocent the fourth’s special emissary to Prester John never returned”.

“I know that I sure as heck wouldn’t want to return from paradise.” Harry’s laugh as he said this was accompanied by the rattle of the chair he was sitting in.

There was a flush of fear on Federico’s face as if he was sure that the antique chair would collapse under the torque generated by Harry’s belly laugh. After biting his lip, he continued, using the map to illustrate as he talked. “As you see here in the center was Jerusalem. It was always at the center of the maps of this period and as more and more of the world was discovered, primarily to the east, Jerusalem moved east as well. Incidentally, all maps begin from a single point. It’s called the projection point. It is the central point on the map and it is chosen because of its singular importance to those who draw the map. As you can imagine, the one thing common to all maps throughout history is that the projection point has moved depending on when and where the map was drawn and who drew it. That was why most of the maps from this period that were drawn by Christians put Jerusalem at the center. And there it was to remain even as the world expanded to take in newly discovered lands that were not Christian.”

“I bet the people in those other lands weren’t too happy to find out that their own center of the world had been shoved out to the boondocks,” Harry said. “Must be why so many people ended up fighting over who got to draw the map.”

“Quite right, Harold, but unless you were lucky enough to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land or you went there as part of one of the Crusades, a map with Jerusalem in the center or anywhere for that matter, had very little utility. In fact, since most people never ventured farther than a few miles from where they lived their entire life they hardly needed a map to go to the village or the castle. Besides, most were illiterate so none of these types of maps were of any use to them. However, even for such people there were in fact maps they could use and, indeed, wanted to use.” He pulled a book from one of the shelves and opened it and passed it to Harry.

“Looks more like an x-ray of someone’s intestines than a map,” Harry said then handed it on to me.

Federico seemed pleased that he had succeeded in baffling Harry. “In fact, this is a photograph of the labyrinth in the Cathedral of Chartre in France. It is one of only three such labyrinths that still survive from the middle ages and is constructed from stone that has been laid in the floor of

the nave. You can see that the loops bending back and forth form a maze with a circular stone at the center. If a person crawled on their knees through the maze until they arrive at the central stone they were entitled to the same forgiveness of their sins as if they had actually made it to the Holy Land with the aid of one of these other maps.”

Harry shook his head. “In other words, one of these labyrinths is a map written in stone?”

“A virtual pilgrimage,” I couldn’t help observing. “Only its one you can actually walk on, or crawl as you said earlier.”

“Exactly,” Federico answered like a teacher pleased with his student’s answer. “And for those who could travel farther than the labyrinths, there were shrines with the relics of various saints and martyrs. Since these were much closer than the Holy Land they served as substitute destinations for pilgrimages. The maps of the dark ages were filled with such sites.” Federico walked back to one of the maps on the walls and pointed to several spots on it, then returned and stood behind an empty chair, gripping it as he continued. “But let me resume the story of maps, which is, after all, my area of specialization rather than theology and church history. Sometime in the 13th century the *Geographia* was discovered in Vatopedi monastery of Mt. Athos by a monk, Maximus Planudes, and geography as a science and maps that were more science than religion was reintroduced. It was in this same approximate time period, the 13th century, that Marco Polo did his traveling. Venice was at its height in power and wealth. Columbus himself relied on Ptolemy’s maps when he set out for India. They were maps that the King of Spain had stolen. Of course, if the Spanish monarchy or Columbus had used a map that indicated the true circumference of the earth, that each degree equaled 70 miles rather than 50, they probably never would have set sail since there would be no advantage to such a long sea voyage to the far east. Even at his death Columbus insisted he’d found the old India rather than a new world. He also thought he’d discovered paradise at the mouth of the Orinoco River.”

Instead of another laugh at the mention of paradise, there was a yawn from Harry.

“I hope I’m not boring you?”

Harry struggled to sit up straight. “Don’t take the yawn personally, Fred. What you’ve been telling us sure makes me respect my old dog-eared Rand McNally road atlas a heck of a lot more.”

Federico closed his eyes for a moment and then he sat down. Harry didn’t notice since he was busy hoisting onto his lap the brief case that I had seen him carrying on the boat from the airport. “Guess it’s my turn, huh?” He said twiddling with a combination lock until the latches popped open. He pulled out a package wrapped in heavy brown paper and returned the briefcase to the floor. He pulled a small red book from the paper. “This here little red book isn’t a copy of one of Chairman Mao’s in case you’re wondering.” He handed me the book. The title read *A Baedeker’s Northern Italy*. “It was published in 1913. The fourteenth edition it says - in English that is. Baedeker was a German publisher and there were four German editions before the first English one. Guess the Germans tourists were here first.” He said with a wink. “You think their children behaved any better back then?”

The book was compact and could fit in a person's pocket although it would have been a tight fit because of its thickness. I opened it from the back where a fragile looking map was folded. You could tell that it had once been glued to the binding so that it could be unfolded without being detached. I decided not to tamper with the map and after looking at the book gingerly I passed it to Federico.

"It's just a couple pages shy of 700 and not one of them is missing - I checked the numbers on each one," Harry announced with more than a little pride. "The maps were glued into the binding so that you could unfold them without them falling out and getting lost. Sort of reminds me of the accordion I used to play as a kid. Hated it, by the way, but my mom loved Lawrence Welk. Anyway, I guess the map of Venice lost its sticking power because it was just folded and stuck between the pages. The type is real tiny, which just goes to show how much they packed into each page and that's only for Northern Italy. I'll tell you, they don't publish travel books like this anymore. Of course, we don't travel like they did back then, either, what with their ocean liners, steamer trunks and grand tours."

"And you found this in a town in Colorado called Pueblo?" Federico said unable to hide his incredulity.

"Yes siree, bob, Fred. Bob is just an expression, by the way. It was discovered in a building right across from the old train station, which has been restored, although we still can't get any trains to stop there. To get back to the story though, some fellas were renovating what was once the Santa Fe Trail Hotel into one of those boutique hotels, the kind with Jacuzzis and stuff like that. I guess they figured even folks visiting Pueblo get tired of motels. They came across a couple of trunks of old books and called me up since I own the *Bunch of Books* bookstore. Most of my books are used and some are even rare, although that's not the same as rarely used." He laughed. "Some folks like to call used books pre read but I figure either they've been read or they haven't... As you can expect, anything that's been sitting in a trunk for god knows how long, well it's going to be considered used even though they were in pretty darn good shape considering. The air's pretty dry you see in southern Colorado on account of there not being much in the way of rain. Anyway, I paid them about twenty bucks for the kit and caboodle. When I opened them up and sorted them out I found this one."

"It's not exactly the place you'd think a travel book on Italy would end up," I said.

"You'd be surprised what ended up in that part of Colorado back then, Dante. There were people from all over the world looking for gold and silver up in the mountains in places like Cripple Creek. And in Pueblo there was Colorado Fuel and Iron, which was the biggest steel mill west of the Mississippi. CF and I is where they made all the steel for the railroads they were building out west. Lots of money and lots of folks from all over the world ended up there looking for their fortune or at least a living. And then there were folks who were just passing through on the train. Pueblo was a big stop on the Acheson, Topeka and Santa Fe. Anyway, the fellow who the book belonged to might have been out there looking for the wild west or on his way to the gold mines or going out to California to see the stars - if they had Hollywood stars then."

“Perhaps he was setting out in the other direction on his way to Europe and Italy?” Federico suggested.

“You know, Fred, I hadn’t thought of that. In any case he seems to have left it at the hotel. When I looked at the inside cover and saw the previous owner’s name I realized that this was the very book that Hilary Evesham had asked the Curiosi’s in the U.S. about. Being in used books I always take a special interest when a fellow Curiosi is looking for a particular book – not that I’ve ever had one they were looking for until now. So, to make a long story short, I got a hold of Hilary and she asked me if I could join her and Fred here in Venice right away and to bring the book with me? The next thing you know here I am.”

As if on cue the black phone on the table rang. Federico, who had been stroking his goatee in unconscious mimicry of Harry, picked it up.” He listened for a minute, nodding his head several times before he said anything. “I understand. We will meet you there. Ciao.” He put the receiver back into the cradle and turned back to us. “That was Signora Evesham, herself.”