

FROM THE CURIOSI CASEBOOK

-DARK MATTER-

Installment Three

By Tim Wintermute

"There they are." Felippo pointed across Campo Manin to the entrance of a Calle. A woman holding a closed umbrella above her head was leading a group of elderly tourists from the Orient through the narrow street toward the Campo where we stood. Behind them were the two men who had been following us before we had given them the slip.

Gloria looked quickly at the small canal several meters away. "Do you think we can make it back to the boat?"

"Even if we could they'd be able to follow us in one of these gondolas. Whatever happens we can't let them get the film in your camera that shows where the relics are hidden. I'll slow them down while both of you make a run for it. I'll get in touch with you back at your hotel as to where to bring the film." Without waiting for a reply from us Felippo walked boldly toward the tour guide stopping her and her followers in their tracks and completely blocking the two men from entering the Campo.

While Felippo engaged the tour guide in a discussion over who had the right of way, Gloria and I ran up the steps and across the bridge then through the shadow darkened street until we entered the Campo San Angelo. Gloria slowed as we headed toward the bridge leading to the Calle dei Frati. Finally, she grabbed my arm, stopped and gasped. "I'm out of breath."

"We can't stop. Felippo won't be able to hold them up for very long."

"You're in better shape than me," she answered breathlessly as she bent over with both hands on her hips.

"It must be from dodging bullets in the Balkans. Not that I would recommend it as exercise. If we can get to the Campo Santa Stephano just over the bridge we might be able to lose them."

"Okay," Gloria exhaled and stood up straight.

We jogged across the bridge, through the Calle de Frati and out into the Campo where we stopped in front of the church that gave it its name.

“We could go inside the Church and try and find a hiding place. I’ve never been inside but I’ve heard the ceiling looks like the hull of a boat so maybe there’s a place to stow away.”

She looked at the Church and shivered. “Santa Stephano has a bloody history.”

“Isn’t that a prerequisite for a martyr? And Saint Stephen wasn’t just any old Christian martyr from what I remember, he was the first.”

“I meant the church not the saint. It’s been deconsecrated more than once so I wouldn’t place much faith in its ability to provide any protection. No, I think we should try one of the calles.” Gloria faced the broad stone plain of the Campo and counted the streets leading off of it with her right index finger. “There are seven so the odds are in our favor.” She started pointing at each one as if she were doing eeny meeny miny moe.

“The closest calle is the first one on the left so let’s go with that one,” I said, wondering why she didn’t try praying instead.

She looked at me, her right index finger still extended into space. “But that would be too obvious.”

“Since they’ve already spotted us it’s a moot point.” I grabbed her left hand and pulled as she looked back at the two men running toward us from the Calle di Frati.

The men yelled just as we entered the calle. Unfortunately, it was straight and narrow just when we needed one that was crooked and wide. It felt like we were running through a gun barrel with the bullet just behind us. I looked over my shoulder and saw that the two men were walking rather than running toward us.

“They’ve dropped back for some reason,” I yelled at Gloria.

“The reason is right in front of us,” she said stopping suddenly.

We both stopped and looked at the waters that blocked our way. On the wall of the building on the other side of the canal a sign read Rio del Santissimo. “We may have to swim.”

“I don’t know how to swim and, just like you and Felippo, I can’t walk on water.”

“Then we need a miracle,” I said looking back at the two men who were now only twenty meters away.

“Will a gondola do?”

“What?” I yelled and, glancing toward Gloria I spotted the gondola she was looking at as it drifted toward us with the gondolier standing in the stern.

“Jump,” Gloria yelled and we both leapt over several feet of water toward the gondola as it slid past and landed at the feet of a Japanese couple.

“Excusi,” we both said in unison as we untangled ourselves and slid onto the bench facing the stern and the two startled lovebirds. The gondola bobbed back and forth as the gondolier struggled with his oar to steady it. Behind him, on the quai one of the men grabbed for the pointed stern and missed, toppling into the water in a gushing belly flop.

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“You were right after all about escaping as stow-aways when you joked about hiding in Santa Stephano’s,” Gloria said after we stepped ashore on the other side of the Grand Canal from the Rio del Santissimo.

“Wrong about the vessel, though.”

We walked across the Campo San Vio to a sidewalk cafe where we both ordered espressos at the bar.

I have to admit it’s the first time I’ve taken a gondola ride with a...”

“Nun,” Gloria finished my stutter. “It’s the first time I’ve been in a gondola.” She jiggled the espresso cup and then looked at me, a smile creeping across her lips. “I can assure you that our ride together was something I will always remember.”

“But not treasure?”

“I have taken a vow...”

I felt my face flush. “I didn’t mean, you know, that it was supposed to be romantic.”

She laughed. “Vow of poverty is what I was going to say. I could never afford, much less justify, the cost of a gondola ride. But now that you bring up romance, I hope we didn’t spoil the romantic gondola ride for the couple in the gondola.”

“The wad of Euros I gave the Gondoliere will give them another hour at least to get back into the mood. He’ll probably throw in some more songs, in fact.”

Gloria stretched out in her chair and looked up. I followed her gaze toward the sky.

“I must admit, as much time as I’ve spent inside churches, not even a cathedral’s ceiling can come close to the sky itself. No matter how high they soar they are stopped by something we

have made and no matter what is painted on them it's never more than what the mind can grasp, but when you look at the sky the mind cannot begin to grasp what the eyes can see."

"I'll leave the comparisons with churches and cathedrals to you, but I can tell you the sky right now looks a lot different to me than it did from the other side of the Adriatic a week ago."

She didn't answer. Instead we sat there until the waiter interrupted the silence as he cleared the cups and saucers. Gloria looked at her watch. "My goodness, I need to get this film to Giuseppe and Felippo. Felippo said he would leave a message at the hotel telling us where to bring the film."

After a short walk we were back at the hotel. I decided to go to my room for minute while Gloria went to the front desk to check for messages. When the elevator opened I reached out to flip the light switch next to the elevator that would illuminate the pitch black hallway. Instead of hard plastic my hand struck something soft. Before I could withdraw it, it was pulled back behind my back, along with my other arm and another hand covered my mouth. In seconds the hand was replaced with tape, my legs and arms were tied with rope and I was stuffed into something that felt like a coffin but must have been a trunk. Whoever had kidnapped me decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator. When the jolting stopped, I felt the trunk skidding across the pavement and then lifted and deposited onto boat judging from the swaying back and forth and the outboard motor that sputtered to life.

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"No wonder it was so heavy, this is not the nun."

From the floor where I had been dumped I looked up at the two men who had been chasing us. The tall man, still wearing the stylish sunglasses pointed to the squat, broad shouldered man. "You can call him Silvio." Other than Silvio and the man talking to me there were no other customers in what seemed to be a small, neighborhood bar.

"And me, you can call me Bernardo. Those aren't our real names of course. You must be Signor Flynn, the nun's assistant?" Bernardo said then realized my mouth was taped. He looked at Silvio who removed the tape with one swift motion. Then he untied my arms and legs.

"I am sorry, Signor Flynn for the inconvenience." Bernardo said as he shook my hand. "We had expected that you would be the nun. It was dark and so here you are instead. We have the honor of bringing you to a place that many tourists do not see – a real Venetian tavern. They are called bacari. Have you ever been in such a place?"

"No."

"I thought not. Bacari are conducive to conversation. Only for men, however, because women are not allowed."

"In that case, what would you have done if it had been Sister Gloria?"

Bernardo gave me a puzzled expression and then his face lit up. "Oh, you make a joke. For the Sister we would make an exception, wouldn't we, Antonio?" He looked at the man behind the bar whose name I assumed was not, really, Antonio. "Nun's aren't real women, anyway. So now that we are all here we would like to have a little chat "

"I bet."

"Excusa?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Ah, if only it was nothing. But, you see it is something. Something that is very important for us." He stopped and looked toward the man behind the bar, who I hadn't noticed until now. "Antonio, can we have something to drink? What would you like, Signor Flynn? Anything you want."

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Oh, that would not be good. Silvio and I would not like to drink while you have nothing. I will buy you a nice glass of wine." He turned to the bartender. "A bottle of your best vino rosso from the Veneto, Antonio, and three glasses, please."

I took a sip and put it down. Bernardo pointed at the glass. "You don't like?"

"Ordinarily, yes."

"But not now? I see. You are afraid of us? No need for that." As he spoke he adjusted his sun glasses. "We followed you with the nun."

"I know."

"Yes, we know that you spotted us. It was very clumsy on our part." He looked at Silvio who bowed his head in shame. "Tell us, how did you give us the slip? The first time, because we know how you escaped the second time. That gondoliere looked very surprised."

"That was nothing compared to the couple whose honeymoon we crashed." They didn't laugh so I added. "We used a row boat the first time."

"You mean you hijacked a boat the first time as well?"

"No, it had been left there for us to use. It was part of the plan although you chasing us wasn't."

Bernardo scratched his chin. "That must mean that the place you went to, where the mosaic is hidden, is on a canal?" He looked at Silvio who was probably rolling his eyes behind the dark

shades of his sun glasses. "Of course, that does not help us very much because this is Venice, after all. Could you be more specific as to where you went in the boat?"

"I don't know where we went, exactly. I'm not from Venice."

"Yes, we know you are not from Venice, but you could tell us what the building looked like."

"The front of it was covered by a big canvas sheet."

"I see," Bernardo stroked his chin again. "This means that the building was being restored."

Silvio finally asked. "But there are many buildings being restored in Venice so how will we know, which one?"

"Ah, but they always paint on the canvas what the front of the building looks like, or what it is supposed to look like when they are finished restoring it." Bernardo turned to me and asked me to describe what was painted on the canvas. "Please," he added politely.

"You're the good copper? Does that mean Silvio is the bad one?"

"We are both good!" Silvio finally spoke. "We are working for the Church, for the Holy Father, himself."

"You're on a mission from God, is that it? Does that mean I'll be excommunicated if I don't tell you because not being Catholic that wouldn't be much of a punishment."

Bernardo shrugged. "No, but for the nun it would be another matter. You would not want that to happen to Sister Gloria, would you? Nuns take a vow of obedience. Since you are her accomplice if we ask you then we are asking her and she is obliged to tell us the truth. Otherwise, we will have no alternative but to report this to our superiors, the Holy Father himself."

"Okay," I answered and described what was painted on the canvas.

"I know the building," Bernardo smiled. "It is near the Palazzo Foscari, which is on the Grand Canal. The building you described is the Palazzo Doloro. It is on the Rio di Ca' Foscari. It makes sense that Foscari would have hidden the mosaic nearby."

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now. The good Sister has lived up to her vows."

"But, can I go?"

"Go? Of course. But not until you finish your wine and then have another. Perhaps the bottle? Enjoy yourself. You Americans, even those with some Italian in them, are always in a rush. We

insist that you slow down.” He nodded toward Antonio. “Also, Antonio, would be greatly offended if you did not enjoy the hospitality he has offered. So, you see, relax and enjoy your private party.” He looked at his watch. “The place does not open to the public until 5 PM. Then, Antonio will let you leave. But, of course you are invited to stay, if you are still enjoying yourself. This bacari’s regular customers are quite colorful and can be very entertaining.” Bernardo then turned Silvio. “Let’s go.”

“Yes brother,” Silvio answered as he walked quickly to the door. They waved to me and then left.

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When I got back to the hotel it was after six. The clerk gave me a note from Gloria. She wrote that I should meet her at one of the confession boxes inside St. Marks. When I reached the Basilica it was closed for the day, but following the instructions in Gloria’s note I walked around to the north side where the Porta dei Fiora was unguarded and unlocked and entered the Narthex. I knew from previous visits that the images of St. Mark that are displayed everywhere in the Basilica are accompanied by a lion, which is also the symbol of Venice. However, looking up at the Dome of Creation I noticed for the first time that the lion is shown as both the first animal that was created but the first one named by Adam. As I walked under the southern arch of the narthex the mosaic of the flood also displayed the lion as the first to be invited onto Noah’s Ark and the first one to disembark into the new creation. When I entered the sanctuary I looked up into the huge bowl of the Dome of the Pentecost, at the mosaic where St. Mark sits with the other Apostles. Even at this distance it was clear that St. Mark was the real star while even Peter was relegated to just a supporting role. No wonder the Vatican is pissed at Venice.

Beneath the dome, the sanctuary continued into the distance following the outline of a Greek cross, with five domes. At the center of the cross, where the arms of the cross - the transepts - join, was the largest dome, the Dome of the Ascension. The Basilica’s upper walls and ceilings were covered with gold and mosaics that turned the incandescent light into a honey colored dusk that grew darker as it descended into the marble clad lower sections. Even the floor was covered with mosaics. A rack of sputtering votive candles next to one of the massive pillars that flank each side of the sanctuary, created a circle of light revealing some of the mosaics that covered the floors as well a row of confession boxes that looked like telephone booths. Given the ever increasing number of sinners and the shrinking supply of priests it was only a matter of time before they would allow people to call in their confession. No doubt they would get a voice mail system that would route the call based on the type of sin to the appropriate pre-recorded message of absolution and the penitential acts that were required.

All of the confessionals had their curtains pushed back except for the middle one, which only had the curtain drawn on one side. I entered and sat on the bench, the right side of my face a few inches from a screened opening. Still feeling claustrophobic from my time in trunk I decided against closing the curtain on my side.

“Bless me for I have sinned,” I mumbled, omitting the Father from the words I remembered from the distant past when I had last confessed to someone other than a bartender.

“How long has it been since your last confession?” Gloria’s voice whispered into my ear through the screen.

“Never, at least in a confessional,” I answered.

“It is my first time as well,” she answered. “On this side, I mean.”

“I do have something to confess, though.” I stammered, and then told her about the kidnapping. “I confess that I described the picture of the building that was on the canvas covering the front and they were able to identify it as the Palazzo Doloro. I also told them about the secret room with the mosaic on the floor that showed where the relics of St. Mark are hidden. They seemed surprised when I told them that and I realized too late that they didn't know it was a mosaic we were looking for. They have had time to get to the Palazzo Doloro and see the Mosaic for themselves so now they know where his relics are hidden.”

Instead of scolding me, Gloria answered as if she were my spiritual counselor. “Don't feel guilty about that because what you didn't know was that the place Felippo took us wasn't the real Palazzo Doloro. Felippo had a duplicate made of the canvas that covers the Palazzo Doloro and used it to cover the Palazzo where we went. That was the reason he was in such a hurry because as soon as we left his men removed it. I didn't know about this myself until Giuseppe told me. He said he didn't want us to have to lie if we were caught but I think he was really worried that we might not be very good as liars. Anyway, we immediately developed the photograph and using it we were able to identify the location of relics. Giuseppe and Felippo went to the spot where the relics were hidden to retrieve them. They said to meet them at the altar at six.” I could hear the curtain being drawn back from her side of the confessional.

“Wait,” I said. “I haven't finished yet. I've got a lot of sins to confess.”

“I'm sure you do, but as much as I would enjoy hearing you recite them you know that women aren't allowed to be priests - yet, so I don't have the Church's authority to absolve your sins.”

“I feel cheated somehow.”

“So do I.” She was now standing in the opening looking at me with a grin on her face. “In any case if we don't go now we'll be late. They also told me that we should try to be as invisible as possible. I think they want to avoid attracting any attention.”

I climbed out of the confession box and followed her. Like kids playing hide and seek behind trees, we darted from pillar to pillar, as we made our way to the front of the Basilica. We passed the entrance to the Treasury and finally reached the right transept. Gloria pointed across to the center of the sanctuary. Giuseppe and Felippo emerged from behind the pillars on the opposite side and headed toward the ornate screen of Byzantine iconostasis that separated the sanctuary from the choir and the high altar beyond. They were carrying what looked like a small metal coffin and disappeared through an opening at the far end of the screen.

Gloria tugged at my sleeve and pointed to the place where the screen ended on our side. "That is the public entrance to see the altar. Ordinarily you need a ticket to enter. I don't suppose you bought a ticket? No matter, we'll leave something extra in the poor box."

We sprinted across the open space that formed the arm of the cross and through the entrance. Crouching behind a railing we could see Giuseppe and Felippo. They had been stopped by Father Lupurelli, who was accompanied by my two abductors, who called themselves Silvio and Bernardo. Instead of trench coats, the two brothers were wearing the black cassocks of a religious order. "Now I know why they called themselves brother because they didn't look like they had the same parents," I muttered. The coffin was on the floor in front of the high altar just outside the shadows of the marble canopy that covered the altar and through the marble columns supporting the canopy the golden wall of the Palo d'Oro, the alterpiece, glowed in the soft light.

Father Lupurelli addressed Giuseppe as if he were a child caught stealing candy. "You thought you would get away with this? I have to admit this Dante Flynn fellow was a very good liar. Brother Emelio and Brother Carlo were taken in and they convinced me as well." Both of the brothers bowed their heads in contrition as he said this. "It wasn't until we entered the Palazzo Doloro that I realized we had been tricked. Of course, I knew you would be bringing St. Mark here to replace the relics before your trickery could be discovered. Fortunately, we had a very fast boat and the police weren't about to stop a priest and two brothers. Even in Venice there is still some respect for the cloth."

"Dante didn't lie," Giuseppe answered. "Felippo had covered the front of the building with the canvas that had the Palazzo Doloro façade on it."

Father Lupurelli bowed. "A deception worthy of a mask maker. And you," he turned to Felippo, who was calmly unwrapping a stick of gum. "I salute your ability to execute such a deception but not your piety. Don't you think that chewing gum is disrespectful of Saint Mark?"

Felippo shrugged, put the gum back in his pocket and crossed his arms. Lupurelli turned back to Giuseppe. "If you are thinking about stopping us from taking all of the relics of Saint Mark you should also think about how you have been caught red handed and would have to explain to the good citizens of Venice that they had been lied to for centuries? Besides, it isn't as if we are stealing because the right hand of St. Mark that your ancestors gave us was a fake. You Venetians, who have never done anything without calculating the financial advantage, should understand better than anyone that you owe the Pope not only the hand of St. Mark but you also now owe nine centuries of interest as well. All of the relics will cover the debt."

"You didn't mention the head?" Gloria said as she stepped into the light. "Won't you have to give the head to the Coptic Church?"

"Ah, Sister Gloria. I thought you might be lurking in the shadows. To answer your question, it is my opinion that we never should have given it to the Egyptians in the first place. Since it is not necessary to expose this ruse of the Venetians now that they are giving us all of the relics as an act of piety and obedience to the Pope, the Copts will never know that they have the head of some pauper rather than a saint. But before we claim what is rightfully owed to us, how do I

know that you haven't removed the relics?" Lupurelli said, taking out a small flashlight and carefully examining the reliquary after you removed it from its hiding place. After a few minutes he announced "The reliquary is authentic. It is the right age and design and this Latin inscription says it contains the relics of the sacred apostle. The question remains, however, as to who lies behind the cover, or shall I say, inside it? Perhaps Foscari removed the relics and hid them somewhere else. After all, we know he was a devious man."

Giuseppe responded. "Trust me, the relics of St. Mark's are inside."

"Yes, but I must see for myself to make sure that it isn't empty." He motioned to Silvio who took out a screwdriver from one of the folds of his cassock and walked over to the reliquary. After a few minutes of prying with Lupurelli directing, Silvio lifted the top. Lupurelli directed the beam of his flashlight into the box and after poking around inside for what seemed like an eternity, he stood up and pronounced. "Just as you said, it contains the relics, including the Apostle's right hand that you Venetian's so deceitfully pretended to give to us. Without a relic of St. Mark you will need to rename your Basilica. Maybe Santa Lucia? After all, she has only your railway station named after her and certainly the patron saint of the blind would be appropriate since you couldn't find St. Mark for eight hundred years. Of course, you will need to do something with all of these mosaics of St. Mark. I think they would look good in the Vatican Museum, don't you?" He laughed again and waved his hand to Silvio and Bernardo. They stooped and slowly lifted the reliquary. Even though Bernardo was taller, his end sagged beneath Silvio's as they carried it in a procession behind Lupurelli.

As soon as the echo of their footsteps subsided into the stillness of the Basilica, Felippo took out the stick of gum and popped it in his mouth. Gloria and I stood up and joined them at the altar. "Why did you tell Lupurelli the relics were in the reliquary?" Gloria asked Giuseppe. "Did you really think he would believe you?"

"On the contrary, I most definitely thought he would not and that he would, in fact, look for himself. Which is exactly what he did. However, if I had not protested he would have been even more suspicious and probably looked even closer. But the real reason is that I definitely do not him to accuse me of lying to him."

"Then I'm sorry that you were forced to lie."

"He didn't lie, Sister," Felippo laughed, sending a wad of gum onto altar. "Some actual relics of St. Mark were in the reliquary." He held up his right hand. "Did you know that the hand has more bones than any other part of the human body? I am not lying to you. It is the truth."

"You switched the relics?" I asked Giuseppe.

"Of course. We had already switched the original and fake relics and the real Saint Mark is now in the reliquary under the altar that Felippo is in the process of desecrating." He turned to Felippo who was vigorously prying his gum from the top of the altar.

Felippo shoved the congealed gum into his mouth. "It's not a desecration. I was just having it blessed."

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"Won't Lupurelli's claim that the Vatican now has all of St. Mark make it impossible for you to confess the truth?" I asked as we walked out of St. Marks through the same side entrance I'd entered from. "If you tell them the truth then the entire deception will come out and they will come back and this time get the real relics as compensation?"

"We fully expect that Monsignor Lupurelli will announce that the Vatican has discovered the relics of St. Mark at the upcoming symposium."

"This is the same symposium that I will be attending, thanks to his invitation," Gloria said. "And I will most respectfully ask for proof and that a full battery of scientific tests should be conducted. After the tests he will then admit his error and that, in fact, the only relic of St. Mark the Vatican has in their possession is the right hand of the Apostle, which is the very hand that Venice so generously gave to the Papacy nine hundred years ago."

"So, you see," Giuseppe added. "There is no deception because Gloria merely points out that everything is in its rightful place and nothing has changed."

"But since Lupurelli now knows there was a switch won't he just tell everyone what happened and that he was tricked?"

Giuseppe answered as we turned the corner and stepped into the Piazza in front of St. Marks. "And if he told the truth he would have to admit that he was involved in kidnapping and if actually did confess to such a crime do you think that the Vatican would want to be involved with a confessed kidnapper?"

"And you were kidnapped, weren't you?" Felippo said with a wink.

"I guess I was but if I was going to be kidnapped in the name of religion I'm glad it didn't happen until I was out of Bosnia. Otherwise, I'd be dead as well." I said as we walked toward the Grand Canal, which had washed over the stone embankment and past the twin columns of San Marco and San Teodoro. The aqua alta was bleeding onto the Piazza in the setting sun.

"It looks like we'll get our feet wet," Gloria said. "But it's only water."

"I don't suppose you could turn it into wine because I could sure use a drink?"