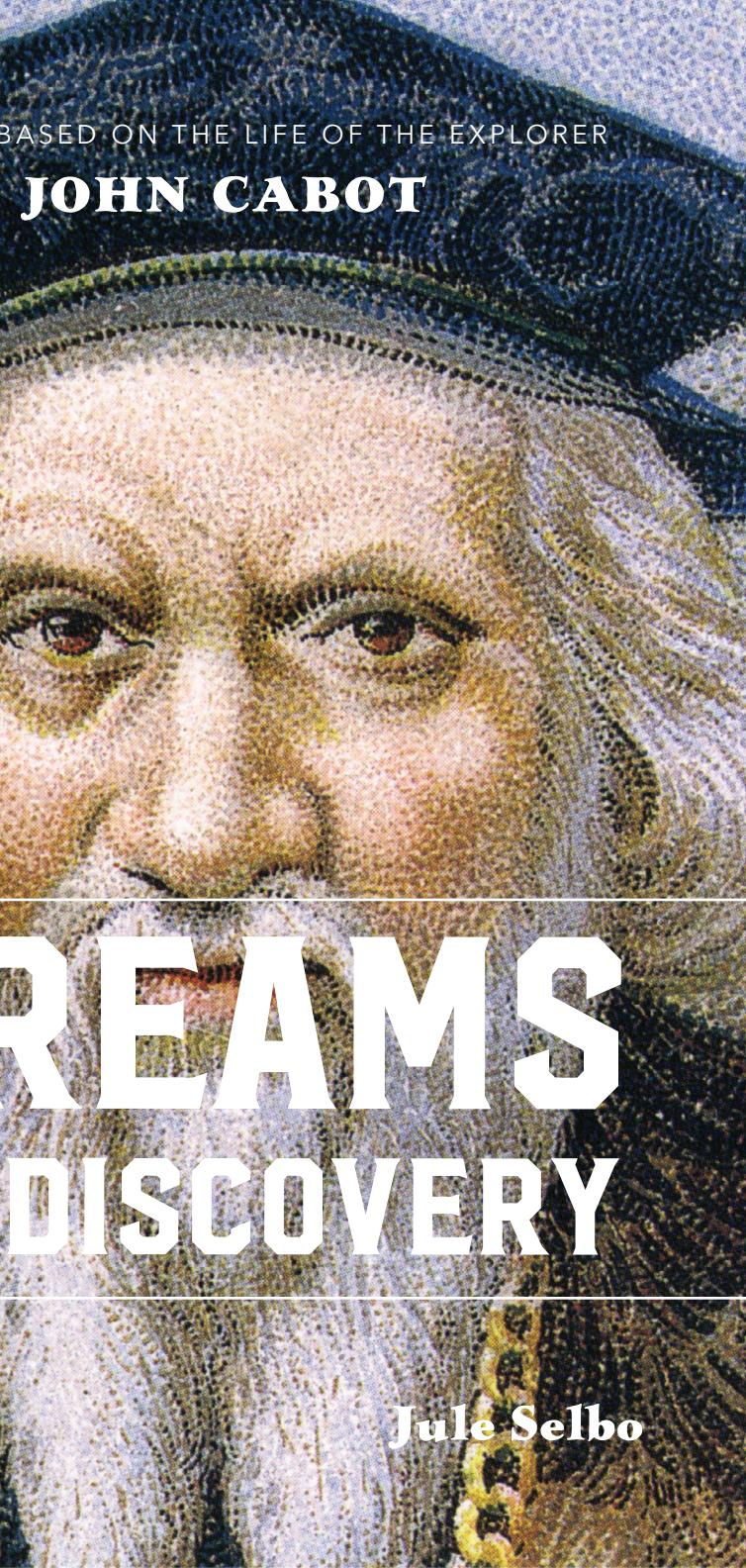


A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF THE EXPLORER
JOHN CABOT



DREAMS OF DISCOVERY

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PROJECT

Jule Selbo

Chapter One

The first days of 1460 had blown into Genoa with very strong sea winds. Energetic Giovanni Caboto, ten years old, flew down the narrow, icy alleyway from Via Banchi towards the harbor. His thick, dark hair fell past his ears; it was flattened to his head under a worn leather cap. His wool scarf left his long nose barely visible and his breath formed clouds in the cold air. “Come on, Piero, the ships are docking—Papà expects our help.” Giovanni ran backward for a moment, a huge grin on his face. “We might see treasures, Piero! Maybe even pirates!”

His brother moved his short, chubby legs trying to keep up, but Giovanni was taller, leaner, stronger, faster—everything Piero wanted to be. He huffed. “Mamma’s not happy we hurried out of church.”

Giovanni shrugged and continued on. “Fra Marco, he sings too much. Even God must tire of it.”

Father Marco always frowned at Giovanni’s squirming on the flat wooden benches in the medieval Church of Saint Mary

Magdalene. But he had also talked to Giovanni's devout mother about her son's quickness and his adroit understanding of Biblical stories and teachings of the Catholic Church, and intimated that the Caboto family would do well to have one of their sons dedicate his life to God. Signora Caboto would have liked to have a son pave her family's way to heaven—for she feared her husband's interest in the wealth of purse outpaced his interest in the wealth of soul. But she knew that the priesthood would never be for Giovanni; just last week he had confided to her that he saw his future as a pirate.

Piero came to a stop. His cheeks were dotted with red splotches from the biting wind. "Wait, Gio, *attendere prego*." He leaned against one of the massive walls of Palazzo San Giorgio, a large palace built two hundred years before by Genoa's first appointed leader, the doge.

Giovanni relented, pulled his scratchy scarf closer on his neck, and ran back to Piero. "You're right, this is good place to rest for a moment. I've told you that here, in this palazzo's dark and cold dungeons, Marco Polo was kept a prisoner."

"You tell me every time we pass by."

"This is where he told of his adventures in the Mongol Empire." Giovanni pressed his gloved hands against the thick stone edifice and told Piero to imagine the Venetian explorer Marco Polo, captured in the Genoese war with Venice in 1298, and his cellmate, the writer Rustichello of Pisa, talking of the riches of the Far East and of rescuing princesses. "Just think, when they were released after months of sharing terrible food with rats, the book *The Travels of Marco Polo* was published." Giovanni had read the book many times.

"You told me that too." Piero blew his nose into the piece

of cloth his mother had put into his sleeve at church. He felt Giovanni's hand on his shoulder.

"Give me your hand, Piero." Giovanni's voice was kind. "You know I'll never leave you behind."

Piero grabbed Giovanni's outstretched fingers, glad to be guided through the steep, thin streets where familiar metal workers and leather craftsmen worked in their bottegas and into the harbor and its teeming throngs of traders, merchants, sailors, and smugglers.

"Ah, Piero, look at the ships!" Giovanni's large brown eyes became even brighter as he breathed in the salt air and took in the unloading of spices, silks, lutes, swords, harps from the Far East, and fine horses from Arabia. As he and Piero dodged through the crowds, Giovanni longed to stop and listen to sailors' spine-tingling stories of great voyages, colorful bazaars, caves filled with hordes of jewels and ancient statues, palaces of eminent princes, and people with faces the color of honey or dark tea, whose thick, braided hair reached to the ground. Of eunuchs and concubines and men who wore extraordinary turbans like towers atop their heads. Of carts painted in vibrant hues, strange foods that he had never tasted. Giovanni longed to be part of these adventures. He stopped for a moment and sighed, pointing at a gleaming carrack, its massive ropes holding the cargo ship to the largest dock.

"Maybe I should stow away on that ship when it leaves for Constantinople or Mecca or wherever it's going."

Piero shook his head, causing the light curls peeking out from under his knitted cap to shimmy in the cutting wind. His shivering lips pouted. "No, Giovanni, Mamma and Papà and I would be too sad without you."

The boys nearly collided with a stocky, battered, one-legged

sailor who limped off a ship with the aid of a wooden crutch. The sailor fell to his knees next to the red and white Genoese flag, the colors once held high by Genoa's patron saint. He shouted, "Saint George, I pray you smite the sea dragon who took my leg." Tears spilled on the broken sailor's cheeks. "Even as I give ye praise for the rest of me reaching shore." He crossed himself and kissed the ground.

Piero was wide-eyed. "Did you really see a sea dragon?"

"I did, little man, I did. Monsters tall as the mast lurk in the open water. And I heard the mermaids singing. Seen birds as colossal as churches. When the fog wraps around your ship, hold on to yer soul—all monsters rise in the thick air."

Giovanni pulled Piero away for the sailor's eyes were wild, as if the demons had gotten hold of him. They hurried on. "Those are just stories, Piero."

Piero jogged to keep up with Giovanni. "But, Gio, stories can be true, can't they?"

Giovanni heard the flat tones of English sailors. One, with a thick and rosy face, dressed in a dark blue wool coat with brass buttons and a broad leather hat, called out to him. "Laddie, you with the ratty scarf! Two coins, one for you, one for the beer you fetch me!"

Giovanni, seeing the opportunity to place a coin in his empty pocket, raced over to take the money and a wooden mug from the sailor's hand. "*Sì, Signor.* Right away." Giovanni eyed Piero, his eyes demanding obedience. "Stay here, Piero." Giovanni raced across the busy dirt lane to the market cart filled with barrels of ale.

Piero stared up at the sailor's eye patch and scraggly beard. "Are you a pirate?"

The florid-faced sailor scoffed. "Not me. I'm a rigger, take

care of the sails under the British flag, laddie. England. Best place on earth."

Giovanni, out of breath, was back with the filled mug; he'd been careful not to spill a drop.

"Long live King Edward!" The rigger tilted his head back and gulped the bitter ale.

The boys moved on past wooden docks and a bevy of caravels—the lightest and swiftest ships—just in from the Adriatic Sea. Piero nearly danced with excitement. "What are you going to do with your coin, Giovanni?"

Before Giovanni could answer, he saw a tall, thin dock-worker waving to them. The *camalli* wore patched and worn woolen pants held in place by a thick rope, and a moth-eaten sheepskin jacket too short for his long arms. "Look, Piero. Alfio, Papà's friend, wants us."

Alfio's frog-like eyes seemed to protrude from his forehead. He held out what looked like a hard ball, its surface brown and hairy with fibers. "Want to show you something. For your father." Alfio took a long, thick knife from his bag, set the round mound on the stone street, and whacked it with the dull side of his knife. "This ugly thing comes all the way from a golden island far away, near a magical place called Jaffa." The brown sphere cracked open like the thick skin of a nut. Alfio used his knife to wedge a larger fissure. Then he lifted the shell to his lips and drank. A white liquid ran down his chin. Giovanni and Piero were mesmerized.

"What is it?" Giovanni asked.

"I call it a cow nut because inside there is sweet milk." Alfio offered it to Giovanni and Piero, who nervously stepped back. Giovanni took the cow nut and drank. The nectar in his mouth was fresh and sweet.

Alfio appreciated Giovanni's curiosity. "First I seen it. A

sailor gave it to me. A merchant like your father might be interested. Could be some good trading in it; a person could make a lot of money. Tell your father to remember who told him about it.”

“I shall tell Papà we must trade in cow nuts. *Grazie*, Alfio.”

The boys ran off. Giovanni was excited that he had something new to share with his father.

Giovanni and Piero spotted their tall father, dressed in a worn but clean green velvet tunic, thick leggings, and a brown wool cloak. Signor Caboto was well into his third decade, and more than half of his life had been dedicated to becoming a well-respected spice merchant in Genoa. Now, he watched eagle-eyed over the crates, barrels, and ceramic holders being carried off a large ship docked in the harbor. Spices such as cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, pepper, and turmeric were valuable, not just because they were used to flavor food, but they also preserved food from rotting, so nothing would go to waste. Signor Caboto’s reputation for fairness was known; he would pay a just amount for the spices he imported from Sri Lanka and the Indies—but not a florin more—so that he could charge an honest price of his clients.

Spices from China and India and other Asian ports were transported over long land and water routes by traders, and at each stage on the journey the merchant would add a little to the price. By the time the spices reached their destination in Europe, their cost had doubled or tripled. Giovanni knew that many merchants were hoping that a new route around the Ottoman Empire could be found so that the price of the spices could be better controlled. Signor Caboto saw the boys approach and immediately motioned for them to move small crates into the cart.

"We're late because of Father Marco, Papà," Giovanni apologized.

Signor Caboto shook his head. "Ah, he sings too much."

Giovanni held out the large brown shell. "At the dock, Alfio let us drink from a cow nut. There is milk inside. From Jaffa, Papà. We could bring it into our trade."

Signor Caboto quickly dismissed the possibility. "We have enough with spices and teas, my sons."

Giovanni did not give up. "No one else has this nut, Papà. We could be the first in Genoa."

Signor Caboto's eyes were on the crews unloading goods. "Ah, there are our jars. Check that the tea is wrapped in thick cloth in the barrels and that the bags are not broken open. We must be vigilant, boys, and not take goods that are damaged." He saw Giovanni's disappointment. "Gio, you will understand, when I am old and you take over the business from me, that your clients must know you are the best in a few things. A bird must fly and a fish must swim."

Giovanni stood his ground. "But Papà, a duck can do both."

Signor Caboto laughed. "Ah, you are very clever, Gio."

Giovanni was frustrated and wished his father were more daring. He also wished he had the courage to tell his father that the merchant life was not for him, that he was going to be an explorer and an adventurer and discover wonderful things, such as cow nuts and gems as big as his foot.

Traders moved the thick ceramic jars of spices and barrels of tea into waiting carts. Signor Caboto confirmed the tallies and Giovanni counted out the florins. Giovanni listened to his father and the other merchants grumble about how the Turkish leaders of the Ottoman Empire were making the sea and land routes of the Silk Road more difficult and dangerous. The men sighed. If

only there were another way to get to India, China, Jaffa, and other markets in the Far East.

“Prince Henry the Navigator, God rest his soul.” A merchant crossed himself because the famous Portuguese patron of exploration had recently died. “He funded sea routes to Africa. So now we can trade for Africa’s ivory and gum from the acacia tree—and the prized pepper—but these goods do not compare with profits to be made on the Far East’s silks and gems and spices. The pottery and rugs.”

Another added, “Now the Turks are adding more taxes on each ship and each caravan. And they insist of keeping a portion on the goods. The fees get larger, the looting more aggressive.”

Giovanni ventured a question. “If the Turks keep making it more difficult for the traders, will we at some point not be able to reach the Far East at all?”

Signor Caboto said, “Someday, someone will find a new route.”

Giovanni was fascinated. “But, Papà, what other way could there be?”

A wrinkled merchant pulled his fur coat tighter around his bulbous middle and puffed on an ivory pipe. “What shape is the earth, boy? What did the Greeks tell us?”

“Round. The earth is round like a ball,” Giovanni answered.

The fat merchant nodded. “And that being so, there are those who suggest a new direction. Toscanelli, the mapmaker, thinks we can sail west into the Ocean Sea and eventually—because the earth is round—find the East.”

Another merchant, wearing a hat made of rabbit fur and rings on every finger to alert all to his success, argued, “Many sea captains have tried. Their ships have never returned and many think they’ve fallen off the edge of a flat earth.”

Piero gasped and nestled closer to his father. “Off the edge? Where do they go?”

The rich merchant grimaced. “Some say to nothingness. Some say to hell for their hubris.”

Giovanni blurted, “But the world is not flat, Piero. Today, we know the world is round.”

The rich merchant sniffed and shrugged.

Giovanni turned to his father and asked, “What do you think, Papà?”

Signor Caboto, always one to avoid an argument with a potential customer, rubbed his hands together. “I think it is time to take our goods and your brother indoors—he will soon turn to ice.”

Signor Caboto and his sons pushed the cart up the stone streets toward the bottega.

Giovanni asked him, “Papà, what if that is true, that you can sail west into the Ocean Sea to get to the East?”

Piero chimed in. “You’d be sure to meet pirates, Giovanni. You want to be a pirate. That’s what you told me.”

Signor Caboto gazed seriously at Giovanni. “Is that true?”

“I do think about sailing the seas to find treasures. A pirate does that.”

Signor Caboto said, “Pirates, son, are a sorry lot. They take what is not theirs. If they’re caught for their crimes, they’re hung from their own masts. Are you the kind of person who takes what is not yours?”

Giovanni looked at his father. “When I sail into the Ocean Sea, Papà, you will be proud of me.”



The sun had completed its descent in the winter sky. The wind kicked up. Giovanni and Piero blew on their cold fingers as they put the last of the Caboto goods in place and locked the family's stall near Piazza De Marini. Their father had gone off to enjoy wine and discussions of outsmarting the Ottoman Turks, the Sea Consuls' rising tariffs, the vagaries of Genoa's merchants, and the expected war with the Republic of Milan.

Giovanni and Piero headed toward home, passing a shop that sold honeyed nuts. Piero's eyes grew wide as he imagined the crunchy, sweet taste. "What about the coin you got for getting the sailor's beer, Giovanni?"

"The coin must be used for something more important than sweet treats," Giovanni said, and led his brother down a street dotted with the storefronts of furniture makers, bookbinders, and weavers, and pushed open the door of his favorite shop. The bell over the door sounded. Signor Antonio Fallio, his shoulders in a perpetual hunch, his beard long, and his tunic dusty, was surrounded by books and rolled-up maps. He sat at a long table near the small fireplace, deep into reading a letter.

"*Buonasera*, Signor Fallio." Giovanni took a burlap bag from his pocket. "My father sends you turmeric from Burma to relieve the pain in your hands and cardamom for your digestion." Giovanni saw that Fallio's lunch of salted fish and dried fruit was untouched. "Did you forget to eat again?"

Fallio looked at the food on the table as if seeing it for the first time. "I had to read an important letter from a friend in Venice. A monk of the Camaldoiese order, Fra Mauro, has completed, after many years, the most comprehensive world map."

Giovanni was excited. "A map of the whole world? Do you have a copy?"

“No, no. It is too large—two meters by two meters. And commissioned by the Portuguese court. For the eyes of royals.”

Giovanni nearly shouted his frustration. “But everyone needs to be able to see it, Signor Fallio.”

“You and I agree. Ptolemy’s ideas of the world, a thousand years ago, helped sailors and explorers change how we thought about the world. And we must keep learning more. Toscanelli’s world map is now a decade old—and it leaves so many questions. Fra Mauro’s map may answer some of them.” Signor Fallio patted Piero’s head. “And it shows where sea monsters have been sited.”

Piero hungrily eyed Signor Fallio’s dried plums. “Sea monsters bite your legs off when the ship is in the fog. I heard that today at the wharf.”

Giovanni settled onto a stool near Fallio’s desk. “How did Fra Mauro get all his information?”

“From his own explorations, before he became a monk. From reading the writings on Marco Polo and others. Talking to sea captains and sailors who sailed for Prince Henry the Navigator. Ones that told of rivers, mountains, islands, villages, and cities. Castles. Palaces. Peoples. Hills. Tides and currents. Gates and harbors.” Fallio sighed. “I would very much like to see this map.”

Giovanni longed to see it too. “One day, Signor Fallio. I wish to see it with you.”

Fallio shook his head. “That might be impossible. The doge in Venice is promised a copy. We can hope he will display it. But, alas, perhaps only for his circle of nobles and the tutors of their children.”

Giovanni groaned in exasperation.

“*Calma*, Giovanni.” Fallio knew of Giovanni’s desire for more education. The boy had finished the rudimentary lessons

available to him at the merchants' school, gaining minor tutelage in Latin, reading, and writing. But as a merchant's son, other avenues were closed to him. Only the sons of nobles had access to the best tutors, to the best books and maps. Fallio smiled at Giovanni. "One day, perhaps you'll find your way into Prince Henry the Navigator's library, the one he set up for ship captains and astronomers and cartographers in Portugal."

"The Portuguese don't like us because Genoa has a more important port than Lisbon."

"Anyone with something to offer can find a welcome," Fallio said gently. "Remember that. And now, Gio, let me see you teach Piero what I have taught you." Fallio unrolled a map and positioned it on the table with iron weights on its corners to keep it flat. The map included outlines of Europe, the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Empire, China, and eastern islands. "Show Piero the route Marco Polo took to the Bosphorus, and how he traveled the Silk Road overland to the deserts of China."

Piero's brow furrowed. "Papà talked about the Silk Road this morning. Is it really made of silk?"

Fallio chuckled. "No, no. And it doesn't even look like a road much of the time. The trade route stretches almost seven thousand miles, over mountains and deserts and waters. The traveler, to follow it, must know how to navigate by the stars. The Silk Road is built on dreams and hopes and the idea that by forming a connection of all peoples, we can learn from one another."

"Piero, I'll show it to you," Giovanni said.

Piero leaned into the table and his nose followed Giovanni's finger as his brother pointed to a city on the Adriatic Sea. "This port here is called Venice. It's a great seafaring city like Genoa. It's where Marco Polo lived. He was seventeen years old and finally

got permission from his father and uncle to travel with them to here, Constantinople.” Giovanni traced a trajectory to the most important city in the Ottoman Empire. Then his finger moved east on the map. “The Polos traveled east to the Empire of Trebizond on the Black Sea, and then south and inland, reaching Jerusalem.” Giovanni’s finger pointed further east. “Piero, you’ve heard Father Marco talk about the city of Jerusalem in church.”

“That’s where the Last Supper was. Jesus ate with his Apostles and people called him the Prince of Peace. Before he was betrayed.”

Giovanni nodded and tapped his finger on the map. “See, it’s here, above Egypt.” Giovanni guided Piero’s eyes to another area on the map. “Then the Polos traveled to India and Kashgar, a stop on the Silk Road at the border of a very large country called China. It is where fur caps and spices can be traded.”

Fallio unrolled a map of China and weighed it down over the world map. “This shows China, Piero. Marco Polo also called it Cathay. A land so large that it makes the boot of our Italian Peninsula look very tiny.”

Giovanni pointed to areas in China. “The Polos found their way on the Silk Road to Lanzhou in China’s Gansu province. They saw ancient temples.” Giovanni’s finger moved. “Then to Cambaluc, the capital of the Yuan Dynasty. There they met the wise and sometimes scary Great Kublai Khan of the Mongol Empire.”

“Scary?” Piero’s eyes were wide.

Fallio ate one of his dried plums. “If the khan did not like you, he could make your journey very difficult.” Fallio took a copy of *The Travels of Marco Polo* from his shelf. “But the khan was also a very curious man, which is admirable. After meeting Marco Polo, he wanted to know more about Christianity. He

asked the Polos to travel back to Rome to ask the pope to send holy water and one hundred learned priests. But the pope was not as generous as the khan hoped and refused the request. The Polos had to convince two friars to travel back with them. But as they approached the Gobi Desert, the friars became frightened of the arduous path. They turned back to return to Rome.”

Giovanni shook his head. “How could anyone deny adventure? They could have seen snow leopards and giant camels and moveable tents that are kept as warm as houses.”

“When Marco Polo told the khan the bad news, the khan was not pleased. He had been told that those of the Catholic religion were generous—or at least interested in him or his people. But because Marco Polo told him the bad news in the khan’s own language, the khan’s anger fell away.”

“Marco Polo could speak many languages, Piero,” Giovanni said. “It was one of his talents.”

“Why don’t they speak our language in China?” Piero asked.

“There are thousands of languages in this world, Piero. A person who can speak to someone in his native tongue has a prized talent. This ability brought Marco Polo great favor and the khan insisted he travel to new places to represent the Mongol interests.” Fallio pointed to Tibet, Burma, and India. “Polo traveled to these wonderful places.”

Giovanni grinned. “You love history very much, Signor Fallio.”

Fallio sipped his tea, nodded. “If we do not know the past, how can we move forward with intelligence to not repeat mistakes?”

The door opened and two boys near Giovanni’s age entered the shop. They were short and sturdy, with wide legs and necks

wrapped in rough wool scarfs. Giovanni noticed that their gloves were threadbare and their faces dry from the winter air.

Fallio greeted them. “Bartolome. Cristoforo. Come in and warm yourselves.”

Bartolome, the younger of the brothers, his face full of freckles, took a map from under his arm and spread it on the table. “I brought it to you first, Signor Fallio. I told you I will be a mapmaker. Will you sell this in your Shop of Maps?”

Cristoforo’s piercing eyes crinkled and he smirked. “It is only of the harbors of Genoa and the near islands in the Ocean Sea. And what he imagines beyond—scratches in thin ink.”

Fallio looked at the map, whistled. “*Alora*, the first Bartolome Colombo map.”

Giovanni and Piero peered over Fallio’s bent shoulders. There were cartoons of sailing ships heading west from the Republic of Genoa’s rugged coastline. In the open water of the Ocean Sea, there were sea serpents, mermaids, and colossal mermen wielding tridents. On the left side of the map, Bartolome had drawn a land mass filled with cartoons of Asian temples, fireworks, and gold mines.

Bartolome jutted out his chest, proud. “Toscanelli believes that the Far East can be reached by sailing west into the Ocean Sea. This is a map of that possibility.”

Cristoforo looked at Giovanni and explained, “Toscanelli is a cartographer of great importance.”

Giovanni bristled. “I know. I have studied his map.”

Cristoforo eyed Giovanni. His look was interested—but not friendly.

Bartolome smoothed out his work. “No one has sailed far enough west to find out what is out there, how far away Asia

really is when going that direction.” He looked at his brother. “Cristoforo thinks he will be the first one to find out.”

Giovanni challenged Cristoforo. “You need money to afford a ship. Or the support of people who are very rich.”

Cristoforo nodded. “Or the backing of a king or queen.”

Bartolome grinned proudly. “My brother thinks big.”

Giovanni had never imagined a possibility of a lowly merchant’s son gaining royal patronage. Despite himself, he was impressed by Cristoforo’s boldness.

Bartolome turned to Signor Fallio. “Will you sell my map in your shop?”

Giovanni pulled the coin he had just earned from his pocket and put it on the table. “Is this the price of your map?”

Cristoforo hooted. “Ah. My brother’s first customer.”

Bartolome roared with celebration. He rolled up the map and handed it to Giovanni. “Sold. You have fine taste.”

The Colombo boys raced out, calling to Signor Fallio that they would stop by again soon. Signor Fallio settled back in his chair and smiled. “The Colombo boys share your dream, Giovanni. Their father weaves cloth and wants his sons to be in his business. But he, I think, will be disappointed. His boys want to captain ships and steer them to places no man has sailed.”

Giovanni moved to the open doorway. He looked after Cristoforo Colombo as he ran down the street, and made a promise to himself that he would be the first—not Colombo—to go on an adventure into the Ocean Sea.

That night, in the small room that was used for cooking, eating, and his mother’s stitching, Signora Caboto served anchovies and *baccala*, a soup made of salted codfish, olives, and dried

tomatoes. “I added our last potatoes tonight, because it is the New Year and my boys are growing so big.” She kissed the top of Piero’s head but her serious eyes met her husband’s. Giovanni noticed the look and wondered what secret his parents shared. He waited, hoping he would find out. Patiently, he watched his mother pour a Ligurian wine, diluting it with water for himself and Piero. She bowed her head and said the family grace, asking for the Holy Father to shine his kindness on them and watch over them. Giovanni saw another look pass between his parents. It was unusual for his father to be so quiet.

Piero bubbled over with news of their stop at the Fallio bookstore and Fra Mauro’s new map of the world. “There is even a land of green on it.”

“It is called Greenland,” Giovanni corrected him. “Signor Fallio told us a Viking named Erik the Red discovered it when he had to flee a very snow-filled Iceland because he murdered someone.”

Signora Caboto frowned and looked at her husband. “Are these proper stories for young boys?”

“It is history and a reason for new geography and navigation,” Giovanni said, defending Signor Fallio. “That is the most interesting part.”

Piero continued, “Don’t worry, Mamma, the Garden of Eden is drawn on it too.”

“God’s first garden.” She crossed herself. “And we have other things to talk about.”

Giovanni saw his parents’ eyes meet again. What were they holding back?

Signor Caboto put down his spoon and pushed back his chair. “Sons, I have shared very important news with your mother and now I’ll discuss it with you.”

Signora Caboto nodded. “God has given us an opportunity.”

Giovanni knew his mother thought all flowed from God. Not so for Signor Caboto. He believed in hard work. Giovanni wondered if they both were right.

“An aged merchant has offered me an arrangement. The Cabotos will take over his interests in his successful business after I’m acquainted with his most deep-pocketed clients. This merchant also has contacts with traders of goods that can expand our specialties . . .”

“You could consider cow nuts, Papà.” Giovanni added.

Signor Caboto raised his hand, did not want to be interrupted. “. . . such as rugs and pearls that fetch high prices. This merchant’s concern is in Venice.”

“Venice, Papà?” Giovanni was stunned.

“*Sì, Gio,*” Signor Caboto said. “The family will move to Venice.”

“But Genoa was at war with them, Papà,” Giovanni said.

Signor Caboto shook his head. “That is the past and we live today and must look to the future. It is time for us to think of our best interests. The Republic of Venice is the richest port in Western Europe, closer to the Silk Road and the trading posts in the Mediterranean. For a man who wants a fine future for his family, this is all very good. I have asked your mother to pack our belongings. We will leave after the next Sabbath.”

Piero’s eyes filled with tears. “But Papà, this is our home.”

Signora Caboto opened her arms and Piero climbed onto her lap. She whispered in his ear, “Piero. Wherever our family is together is home.”

Signor Caboto turned to his older son. “Gio?”

Giovanni felt an excitement well up inside him. “Papà, Venice is the birthplace of Marco Polo. It is where the Fra Mauro map is. It will be a great adventure.”

Chapter Two

As the calendar turned to February, Giovanni and his family crossed the border into the Most Serene Republic of Venice. After traveling overland more than two hundred miles, they left their rented carriage in the small town of Jesolo in the northern part of the Republic and boarded a flat-bottomed transport ferry made of oak; it had a single mast and square-rigged sail. The salty air of the Adriatic Sea was warm and sweet. Giovanni lifted his face to feel the breeze and the winter sun; he imagined he was on his way to Constantinople or Baghdad or Mecca.

Giovanni's mother held tight to the rail of the sturdy ferry. "I prefer solid earth below my feet, my husband."

Signor Caboto's voice was calming. "Wife, I'm here by your side. The passage will be calm today, the wind steady."

Giovanni knew his mother did not like to be on the water. Her brother had been lost at sea when she very young, and her fear was rooted in a sadness that she rarely talked about. He tried to distract her. "Mamma, I read there are over one hundred

islands that make up Venice. It's sometimes called the Floating City."

Signora Caboto groaned and laughed, not sure this was good news. "Ah, a floating city."

"You will be happy, my wife," Signor Caboto said. "A hundred thousand people live there just fine."

Piero hugged his mother. "Gio says there will be lots of new kinds of fish to eat."

"And it will be warmer than Genoa," Giovanni added. "You like warm air, Mamma."

The sail on the barge filled with a sudden wind and Giovanni spotted the outline of islands on the horizon. "Look, we're almost there!"

The ferry sailed into a wharf in the Cannaregio district. The family climbed into a smaller rowboat, this one manned by two oarsmen. They ventured down a dark canal; the buildings on each side were close to the water, causing the narrow canal to be in constant shadow. Signor Caboto told them that canals were used as streets in Venice, and that citizens hopped from boats to streets whenever they wanted to move around the city. Signora Caboto shivered and frowned, looking at the water lapping at the doors of the buildings. "I heard there are times when there's not an inch of dry ground in Venice."

"Rain can cause the canals to overflow. That is true," Signor Caboto said. "But the city has been here for hundreds of years. Everything returns to its proper place."

Signora Caboto put on a stolid face. "I'm sure I will get used to it."

The tight avenue of water soon fed into Venice's Grand Canal and Giovanni gasped at its bright, bustling festival of color. Seagulls sailed high above their heads. There were long

narrow boats painted in gold, pink, and green floating past carrying women and men in vibrant silk clothing edged with fur. Pastel-painted palazzos and storefronts seemed to rise out of the water. Musicians stood in some of the narrow boats, strumming guitars and singing Venetian ballads. Giovanni thought of Genoa, its duller grays and browns and dark, cold alleyways. On this day in February, Venice was the most exciting place he had ever seen.

The family disembarked at Campo San Silvestro, one of the city's squares. It was filled with market stalls set near the water's edge; fishermen sold baskets of fish, and bakers, wine-sellers, and butchers hawked their products. The citizens, in high spirits, seemed to glide across the *campo*, waving to each other; the timbre of the conversations was light and teasing as they tasted breads and olives and wine.

Signora Caboto sighed with relief when she set foot on the stones of the *campo*. Two violinists played next to the fountain. Children ran, playing tag. Giovanni helped unload their belongings onto a laborer's cart. He walked next to his father as the cart was pulled by the strong laborer.

"Father, Piero and I can push the cart," Giovanni said.

His father leaned down to him. "Gio, you must remember, a merchant must make a good impression. Looking successful will help people trust you. That is why I have arranged for us to move into a home in this *campo*—it is a very respectable address."

They moved through an archway to a small iron gate. Ahead was a compact two-story building with a bright green door and flowerboxes at the low windows. Giovanni saw his mother take it in, a smile on her lips. "Very nice, my husband."

The door opened and a small, round woman, old enough to

be Signora Caboto's mother, stood in the doorway, drying her hands on a cotton towel. Her face was sweet and her eyes kind.

"Wife, this is Signora Ceci. She lives nearby and will help you make this house our home."

Signora Caboto now beamed. She looked at her husband, eyes glowing with gratitude for his thoughtfulness. "Shall we go inside?"

Giovanni noticed their new neighbors watching as his father led his mother inside. They looked impressed.

Signora Caboto happily settled in with the help of the aged Ceci. Giovanni and Piero were soon heading out with their father to explore the narrow stone streets and canals. As Piero danced near the window of a bakery, Signor Caboto put his hand on Giovanni's shoulder. "Gio, it is important for the family to make good with this venture. Going backwards, back to Genoa, is not what we want to do."

"Yes, Papà."

"You are old enough now to understand and be at my side. Let us go and find our store."

Piero pointed at the buildings rising from the water. "Papà, how do they build stone buildings on top of the water?"

"They are built on top of wooden platforms," Signor Caboto explained. "The platforms are supported by special pilings made of the strongest timber and driven into the earth, deep below the water."

Giovanni asked, "But doesn't the wood rot in the water?"

Piero sidled up to Giovanni's side. "And fall into the water and float?"

"This is the story I have been told," Signor Caboto said.

“About two hundred years ago, a great sickness—a plague called the Black Death—spread over many places in Europe. People could get sick by just breathing the air near those that were infected.”

“Black Death, Papà?” Piero’s eyes went wide. He took his father’s hand, wanting to hear every word but nervous about the details.

Signor Caboto continued. “It caused many to leave their homes in Eastern Europe and head toward the sea, where they thought the air and winds would be cleaner, fresher. Some of the people were from places like Slovenia and Croatia and they ended up in Venice. Here, they were blessed with good health. To thank the Lord, they arranged for the strongest wood from their home countries to be brought to Venice so they could build the Santa Maria della Salute Church. It took many thousands of wooden pilings, and the grateful foreigners pounded them into Venice’s shallow lagoons. These people knew when their wood was submerged in saltwater and did not come in contact with the air, it would petrify and become rugged and almost as hard as stone. The Venetians who had lived in the city for a long time took notice and soon wanted to use this wood for their homes and businesses. It has made for a strong city.” He looked around. “Venice is not going to wash away.”

Signor Caboto waved to one of the colorful long boats; he wanted to hire it to take them south on the canal to the Rialto *sestiere*.

“The language is different, Papà. Some of it sounds strange,” Giovanni said.

“*Sì*. Even though we’re still on the Italian Peninsula, the Venetian tongue is a bit different. You must listen to the people around us, hear the pronunciations, and learn to speak as a

Venetian as soon as possible. To be prosperous, our family must be seen as Venetians.”

One of the long narrow boats, painted golden yellow, glided up to the dock. The oarsman, dressed in a yellow tunic and cloak and burgundy-colored leggings, stood at one end, using the oar to steady the boat.

“Are we going to get into this, Papà?”

“*Sì*, Piero, be careful . . .”

But Piero sprung onto the boat, lost his balance, and landed on his backside on the boat’s flat bottom. Giggling, he apologized to the oarsman, who looked down his nose at Piero. “You don’t pounce into a gondola. You must step lightly.”

Giovanni sat on a low bench in the narrow boat. “This is called a gondola? And why do you only use one oar? Why do you steer while standing?” Giovanni’s questions piled on one another.

The oarsman eyed him, assessing the young passenger. “You are not Venetian.”

“We’re from Genoa.” Giovanni looked apologetically at his father; they had already been found out.

“You wouldn’t use a boat like this in the Genoa waters,” the oarsman said. “Genoese waters are too open, too rough. Gondolas are made for Venice. Why do I stand? Because the sandbars in the canals constantly shift, I have to be able to see where they are so I do not run aground.”

Their gondola floated past a robin’s-egg-blue gondola full of ladies whose hair was piled high on their heads and dotted with feathers and jewels. Giovanni thought their faces looked painted—blue on their eyelids, pink circles on their cheeks, red on their lips. Their fur shawls barely covered their brightly colored gowns that were cut low and adorned with ruffled

lace on the bodice and sleeves. Their skirts were flounced and trimmed to show their legs in white and gold stockings and their high-soled shoes were painted in bright stripes. The ladies called out, singing and fluttering their fans. Piero's mouth was agape. "Papà, those ladies look like the clowns from the circus."

The gondolier laughed. "Don't let them hear you say that."

"Keep your eyes forward, my sons," Signor Caboto admonished.

But Giovanni, struck by the gaiety and freedom of the ladies, continued to stare. Women in Genoa did not act like this, and his mother did not act like this. He watched their gondola veer off towards the dock of a pastel-colored palazzo.

"You're tourists?"

Giovanni brought his attention back to the gondolier. "We're new citizens."

"If you're new here, maybe you don't know it takes fifteen years to call yourself a citizen in Venice. You have to earn it."

Giovanni looked at his father. "Fifteen years, Papà? What does that mean?"

Signor Caboto's face was set. "It means we can work here, belong to the merchant guild at a very low stature, and make our way. We will pay taxes, but we cannot vote or have a say in city matters. For fifteen years."

Giovanni was taken aback. "But Papà . . ."

"Our family business will prosper, Gio. And in fifteen years, it will be yours and Piero's. We are doing this for our family's future. For you boys."

Giovanni felt the tightening in his stomach. His father's expectations were so clear and Giovanni did not want to disappoint. But what if he didn't take over the family business? What if, one day, he walked up a gangplank and sailed to Jaffa?

The gondola glided to a pier in the Rialto neighborhood. Signor Caboto paid the oarsman and they stepped onto the dock. “Sons, our store is located in this neighborhood, near the gold and silver merchants and the rug and spice merchants. It will be the advantageous location.”

They passed storefronts of craftsmen who produced fine fabrics—the silks, damasks, and satins for Venice’s wealthy residents and also for export. They passed storehouses fragrant with the exotic scents of the Orient, stores full of goods piled high waiting for the ships that would take them to the markets in the East or to merchants and clients in Portugal, Genoa, or England.

They reached a small *campo*. Pigeons strutted on the stones. Piero chased them, laughing as the birds waited until he was only a foot away before taking to the sky.

Signor Caboto stopped in front of a small storefront. “Gio, the Chabotto Trading Company is here.”

Giovanni looked at the sign painted on the door.

“Chabotto?” Giovanni was confused. His father was pronouncing their name in a new way.

Signor Caboto put his arm around Giovanni’s shoulders. “It is the Venetian way to write and pronounce our name. Your name, in Venetian, translates to Zuan.”

“So now I am Zuan?”

“*Sì*. We are now the family Chabotto. Here in Venice, you are Zuan Chabotto.”