

The Venetian Duck

CHAPTER ONE

It was the laughing of the ducks that woke me up. Whaw, whaw, whaw, like a burlesque comedian with a sinus condition. The ducks were back. A scant six months earlier, an over-developed sense of authority had caused the Fish and Game Feds to kick in the door of a Venice home on the canals to confiscate a nine year old girl's pet duck. Can you picture it?

"Okay, nobody move! Put your hands where we can see 'em! We know you people are harboring a duck!"

The search and destroy mission had to do with an ill-founded suspicion that the quackers had some weird disease that might be communicated to other wildlife in the canals. Heck, I'd be more worried about catching something from the people in the Venice than from the ducks. A lot of locals said that the only sickness involved was bureaucracy.

Anyway, after administering lethal injections to a thousand or more of the feathered favorites it turned out that the uniformed Einsteins had failed to run any tests on the dead ducks for the suspected virus. Instead, the wild creatures, along with the pet duck, were given water nap injections and then unceremoniously cremated. Evidence of the disease, if there ever was one, died with them.

Perhaps it hadn't been considered that ducks are migratory sorts, and they came from all over to our canals, and at all different times of the year, so many had missed the big massacre. Now the ducks were back, and it sounded like they were having a pretty good laugh at the authorities. But everybody laughs at authority in Venice. Venice, California, that is.

I've been to the other Venice, the one in Italy, and there not even a duck would dare laugh at the carabinieri. It's the automatic weapons they carry that chill the impulse, I suppose.

In my little canal-laced clone of the original Venice, the policemen ride bicycles and wear shorts and so don't look nearly so scary. True, they do carry weapons, but so does almost everyone else. Our version of neighborhood watch is a threatening sticker displayed in nearly every

window facing streets and alleys. It reads, "Never Mind the Dog, Beware of Owner."

Every true Venetian has a dog, a gun, or both. There are surely more guns and canines per capita than there are, say, parking spaces. This is the kind of statistic that can lead to misunderstanding and sometimes trouble, especially on a summer weekend when parking is at a premium and tourists clog the narrow streets, gaping at the unique architecture, the mural of Jim Morrison, and our magnificent expanse of beach.

"You *live* in Venice?" people ask, even those who reside in what some would like to call Greater Los Angeles. "Aren't you afraid of all the gangs and the junkies and, and....?"

"Oh, the artists? So inspiring," I like to reply. "Please do drop by sometime?" I smile, basking in the knowledge that they'd rather walk on their lips through a sticker patch.

Venice does have a reputation for trouble, some well-deserved, but much of it quite overblown. Natives tend to enhance the myth just to keep people away from a tightly knit, respectful (if not quite respectable) community. It's like New York's Greenwich Village or San Francisco's North Beach, except that New York could no more harbor a village than San Francisco can pretend it really has a beach. If you could put the two together and semi-ruralize them, you'd have Venice. Most people would say they'd be glad to let you have it, but that's because they come here as looky-loos, thinking they will see what they see on television.

No matter where you live, odds are you've seen the news footage of Venice. You've caught a glimpse of the turbaned guitar player, seen the weight lifters, dancing roller skaters, the bums and the rest of our cartoon characters. You probably think they're a bunch of deadbeats but actually they're fulfilling their roles in life. Make no mistake; these people are professionals doing their jobs.

Take Harry Perry, who makes more money on any given day than your average postal worker and has never had a disgruntled day in his life. Harry's job is to dress up like a deluded Sufi and rollerblade up and down the boardwalk, playing his electric guitar and singing strange little off key tunes to tourists who eventually pay him to go away or to have their pictures taken with him. Everybody has to make a living and Harry, presumably, has a little turbaned family to support. On the side, Harry is a marathon runner, sweat soaked turban and all. Harry is no bum.

Being a bum is much harder. It's like the first line in that book *Forrest Gump*, "Bein' a idiot is no box of chocolates."¹ Neither is being a bum. They may have changed the line for the movie, but it never changes for the bums. Even at its best, it's not much fun as a line of work. At least if you're homeless in Southern California you don't freeze to death in the winter.

Bums are as different from the homeless as F. Scott Fitzgerald thought the rich were from you and me. A good percentage of our Venice Beach bums have chosen the life they live and they get along fine with the locals, just as long as everybody observes the social order. The bums don't hustle us for money because we let them sleep in our laundry rooms, give them our best castoff clothes and generally show them the respect a really good bum deserves. They are as integral to Venice's local color as rudeness is to Paris, talkative taxi drivers are to New York, drag queens to San Francisco and street musicians to New Orleans' French Quarter.

Everybody knows everybody in Venice, although not necessarily on a formal or first name basis. The main form of daily social intercourse is dog walking. Greeting someone's dog by name is more common than addressing the owner. A neighbor returning a lost dog might say, "Hi, are you Duke's mom?" and accept your gratitude for saving the beast from the dread Dog Police and the obligatory \$150 "loose dog on the beach" ticket with a knowing smile, never asking your name.

My dog, Venus of Venice (who, like her namesake sculpture, possesses no arms, only legs) has a formidable rap sheet and a penchant for attempting to flee the scene that rivals O.J. Simpson, except that her chase speed was generally much faster. It's not that she runs away or even gets lost, it's just that she has a problem with really loud noises like firecrackers and gunfire, both of which are pretty common in our 'hood. The sound kick-starts her primal fears and she bolts from a postprandial stroll faster than Secretariat ever made it out of the gate. Usually she turns on her most pathetic and appealing face at various neighborhood doors until someone either brings her home or calls the number on her I.D. tag.

Any given Fourth of July if Venus isn't found hiding under a pile of dirty laundry in the closet I can look forward to five or six phone messages incurred as she works her way down the beachfront, seeking mock sanctuary and true barbecue treats.

¹ *Forrest Gump*, by Winston Groom, original opening line, first edition, 1986.

"Hi, we live on Venice Boulevard and we have Venus and we wondered if we should bring her home. Oops...she just ran out the front door. Anyway, we were having a barbecue and we gave her a hot dog and she seems okay."

"Hi, we have Venus here on 2612 Pacific and we just gave her a hamburger, but she seems to have jumped the fence."

Lost pet anxiety is a hideous emotion, to be sure, but after a time I realized that evoking it was just a trick of the dog trade. Eventually, I would find Venus, her carnivorous desires sated, wandering the canals in search of what she could now consider not the natural prey she enjoyed chasing, but her close personal friends, the ducks.

That's really how the whole thing got started. If it hadn't been for the dog, the ducks and the bums, I wouldn't have met the gondolier and would never have figured out what was concealed under the Venice canals. If you care to understand how I solved the whole mystery, you're going to have to let me start at the beginning of Venice.

CHAPTER TWO - the job

Now known as the nesting place of the "affluent poor," the City of Venice was, ironically, quite literally created out of swampland by the wealthy young Abbot Kinney, a man whose life would be marked by twists of fate as weird as he was himself. In the end, what he did to create the California version of Venice seems almost as supernatural as the seaside city itself.

I moved to Venice shortly before I took the job with Primo Fortunato. You know, the guy who plays Detective Chance Descry on television. I knew it was going to be a sleazy gig when I signed on, but I wasn't in a position to be choosy. Truth be told, I was lucky to have any position at all. At best, my employment record is a bit spotty. It's not that I'm not multi-talented. I've had more careers than Elizabeth Taylor has had husbands. Sadly, the only trait we seem to share is an erratic lack of taste.

My current avocation is that of a free lance researcher, which means I get paid to track down little known facts about subjects that almost nobody cares about. I once spent six months researching the history of redheads in the royal families of the world for the Redhead Society. There are more of them -- redheads, I mean -- than you would think but it was still pretty unsatisfactory work, as it was for a private book for club members only, presumably so they could trace their royal

lineage by hair color. When I suggested that perhaps Queen Elizabeth wasn't really a natural ginger but had imported henna from Egypt, they let me know that my services were no longer required. To condense the fruits of my study to one single sentence, redheads have no sense of humor.

That's when I applied for the research job at Primo Productions. I figured it would be refreshing to have a regular paycheck, and if I kept my trap shut and did what I was told, I might hang on to the gig long enough to rack up some unemployment benefits.

The job application process wasn't exactly grueling. Primo took one look at my legs, the best quality I inherited from my mother, said, "Nice pins, babe," and turned to his assistant and ordered, "Hire her, babe." I was soon to learn that "babe" was what he called everyone from his stockbroker to his stunt double. He had more trouble remembering names than he had remembering his lines, and that's saying something. Primo Fortunato wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he was handsome, charming and had the certain something that is necessary to make it big on television, whatever that something is.

Chance Descry was one of the top three prime time shows of the mid 1980s and the network had granted Primo a good deal of "creative control" of the story line, the corporate way of rewarding an actor who helped them fend off the tide of cable competition. Sometimes it's dangerous to give an actor that much power.

Primo's latest brainstorm involved his character getting hit on the head and then having delusions that he was Humphrey Bogart. The whole thing could be shot in black and white and he could do his Bogart impression, which was, quite frankly, truly dreadful. The writers tried to talk him out of it but arguing with him would have brought out a temper tantrum that would make Roseanne look like a missionary, so everyone just sighed and called him creative names under their breaths. His TV-Q was high but a personal level he was about as lovable as Attila the Hun.

"Hey babe," Primo said, motioning me over with a gesture usually reserved for waiters. "What was that movie that Humphrey Bogart was in? You know, the one with the fat guy, Sidney something? The one about the bird?"

It was only my first day on the job, a job I desperately needed, but I still couldn't resist baiting an ego the size of Montana.

"Ah, that would be *The Venetian Duck*," I said with one of my best phony smiles. Even as the words came out of my mouth, visions of pink slips floated in my head.

I glanced around, but no one on his staff made a move to set him straight about the real critter in the Dashiell Hammett potboiler. You'd have thought even Primo would know it was the Maltese Falcon.

"*You* live in Venice, right?" I was surprised that he knew where I lived. Perhaps he really did read my application and I was flattering myself about my legs. "Get me some research on the place. I gotta get into my character."

Call me perverse, but the man was so out of touch with both reality and fiction that I liked him.

"I'm on the job," I said cheerily. Part of me was bummed to be sent back to the library instead of being a part of the production team. I wasn't going to experience the exciting world of television, but I told myself that this was at least going to be a lot more interesting than The Redhead Society. After all, I further rationalized, I would get to work at the beach instead of some boring TV studio.

I was in my car before anybody could get up the nerve to tell Primo that Bogart was in search of Maltese Falcon instead of a Venetian Duck. With enough cowardice on the part of his staff, I might last long enough to collect at least one paycheck.