

FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL

Story Material

The Cartographer's Daughter

A beautifully atmospheric story set in Venice about a teenager who completes her late father's map of the city's hidden passages.

Level: B1

Skill: Reading

Duration: ~50 min

Age: Teens (11-16)

Topic: Geography & Heritage

Pages: 20

The Story

Chapter I— The City of Water

Venice was sinking. Not dramatically, not visibly — not in the way that films showed, with buildings toppling into the sea. It was sinking the way a person ages: slowly, invisibly, one millimetre at a time, until one day you look in the mirror and the face staring back is not the one you remember. Elena Marin had grown up with the sinking. She was fifteen years old, and the watermarks on the walls of her family's apartment in Dorsoduro — faint brown lines showing where the **flood** waters had reached during past acqua alta events — were higher every year. The line from 2019 was at knee height. The line from 2024 was at her waist.

She lived on the second floor of a fifteenth-century palazzo with her mother, Chiara, who restored paintings for the Gallerie dell'Accademia, and her younger brother, Matteo, who was eleven and whose main interests were football, pizza, and making Elena's life as annoying as possible. The ground floor of the palazzo — which had once been a merchant's warehouse — had been permanently abandoned to the water. During acqua alta, the **canal** rose through the stone floor and turned the entrance hall into a shallow lake. Their neighbour, Signora Benedetti, had lived in the building for sixty years and claimed she could predict the floods by the behaviour of her cat.

Elena's father, Marco, had been a **cartographer**. Not the digital kind — the kind who drew maps by hand, with ink and watercolour on heavy paper, measuring distances by foot and recording details that satellite images could never capture. He had spent twelve years working on a single project: a comprehensive map of Venice's hidden infrastructure — the network of underground passages, sealed chambers, forgotten cisterns, and buried **canals** that lay beneath the city's streets and buildings. Most Venetians did not know these spaces existed. Tourists certainly did not. But Marco had believed they were essential to understanding how Venice worked, how it was failing, and how it might be saved.

Marco had died eighteen months ago. A heart attack, sudden and final, at the age of forty-seven. He had been working at his desk, a magnifying glass in one hand and a mapping pen in the other, adding details to a section of the map that showed the area around the church of San Zaccaria. The map was unfinished. His desk was exactly as he had left it — Chiara had not moved anything, not the pens, not the rulers, not the half-empty cup of cold espresso. It sat in the corner of the living room like a small shrine, and Elena walked past it every day without looking, because looking hurt too much.

Chapter II— The Storm

The acqua alta of November was the worst in three years. The **tide** rose 148 centimetres above normal — enough to flood eighty percent of the city. Elena stood at her bedroom window and watched the water turn the streets into rivers. **Gondolas** floated past at the level of first-floor windows. Shop owners on the ground floors piled sandbags and cursed. Tourists in plastic boot covers waded through Saint Mark's Square taking photographs, as if drowning were an attraction.

When the water receded two days later, it left behind the usual damage: salt stains on the stonework, ruined stock in ground-floor shops, and the slow, invisible **erosion** of the ancient **foundations** that supported every building in the city. In the entrance hall of their palazzo, a section of plaster had collapsed from the wall, weakened by decades of flooding. Behind it, embedded in the old brickwork, Elena found a sealed plastic tube. Inside the tube was a rolled piece of heavy paper — and a note in her father's handwriting.

The note said: "For Elena. If you find this, I was not able to finish. The map is in my desk — the bottom drawer, beneath the false panel. The work matters more than I knew. Please finish it. Look where I have marked X on section 7. What is there will change everything. I love you. Papa." Elena's hands were shaking. She went to the desk — the desk she had been avoiding for eighteen months — and opened the bottom drawer. Beneath a false wooden panel, exactly as the note described, was a leather portfolio. Inside was the map.

It was enormous — nearly two metres square when unfolded — drawn on waterproof archival paper in Marco's meticulous hand. Streets, buildings, **canals**, and bridges were rendered in black ink on the surface. But beneath them, in blue and red ink, was a second city: underground passages, sealed chambers, water channels, and structural voids, all measured, annotated, and cross-referenced with historical sources. It was the most detailed map of Venice's hidden infrastructure ever created. And in the southeast corner, near the church of San Zaccaria, was a small pencilled X with the note: "Access confirmed. Chamber intact. Must document before next major acqua alta."

Chapter III— The Professor

Elena needed help. The map was extraordinary, but she did not have the knowledge to understand its technical details or the expertise to explore underground Venice safely. She found what she needed in her father's address book: Professor Lucia Manzoni, marine **archaeology** department, Ca' Foscari University. A handwritten note beside the name said: "Lucia — the only person who understands what I am doing."

Professor Manzoni was a small, energetic woman in her fifties with wild grey curls and paint-stained fingers — she had been restoring a Byzantine mosaic when Elena arrived at her office. When she saw Marco's map, she sat down slowly and did not speak for several minutes. "I knew he was close," she said finally. "He came to see me three weeks before he died. He said he had found something significant near San Zaccaria — a medieval chamber that connected to a network of passages running beneath the eastern quarter. He wanted to document it properly before publishing." She looked at Elena. "He did not finish." "No," Elena said. "But I am going to."

Professor Manzoni agreed to help — cautiously. "Underground Venice is not a playground," she warned. "The passages are unstable. Many are partially flooded. Some have not been entered in centuries. We need proper equipment, safety protocols, and official permission." She paused. "But your father's map is genuinely important. Venice is losing its underground heritage to **subsidence** and rising water levels faster than anyone realises. Every chamber that floods permanently is a piece of history lost forever. If we can document what remains, we can make a case for **conservation**."

They formed a small team: Elena, Professor Manzoni, and two of the professor's graduate students — Tomasso, a structural engineer who specialised in historic buildings, and Yara, an underwater archaeologist from Jordan who had experience working in flooded environments. Matteo, Elena's brother, was not officially part of the team, but he insisted on being the "communications officer," which meant he carried a walkie-talkie and reported everything to Signora Benedetti's cat. They planned their first exploration for the following Saturday, targeting the area Marco had marked with an X.

Chapter IV— Beneath the Stones

The entrance was in the courtyard of an abandoned palazzo near San Zaccaria — a building that had been empty for twenty years and was slowly being reclaimed by ivy and pigeons. Marco's map indicated a sealed doorway in the courtyard's north wall, hidden behind a stone panel that was designed to look like part of the wall itself. Tomasso found it by tapping the stones and listening for hollow sounds. The panel swung inward on ancient iron hinges, revealing a narrow staircase descending into darkness.

The air that rose from below was cold, damp, and carried the mineral smell of old stone and standing water. Elena switched on her head torch and followed Professor Manzoni down the stairs. The steps were worn smooth by centuries of feet and slippery with moisture. After descending approximately four metres, the staircase opened into a vaulted chamber about eight metres square, with walls of ancient brick and a floor that was partially covered in shallow water — perhaps ten centimetres deep, clear and still.

And on the walls — visible even through the grime of centuries — were mosaics. Golden tiles glinting in the torchlight, forming patterns of birds, fish, and intertwining vines. Byzantine work, Professor Manzoni estimated, possibly twelfth century. "Remarkable," she breathed, running her torch across the surface. "This chamber may have been part of a private chapel attached to the original palazzo. The mosaics are in extraordinary condition — the underground environment actually protected them from the weather damage that destroyed most surface-level Byzantine art in Venice."

But what made Elena's heart stop was something else. On the far wall, scratched into the plaster in small but clear letters, was an **inscription**: "M.M. — Survey marker 7.14 — Chamber confirmed — 12 March." Her father's initials. His survey reference number, matching the map. He had been here. He had stood in this exact spot, seen these mosaics, and begun the work of documenting them. And then, three weeks later, he had died at his desk, the map unfinished, the discovery unreported. Elena placed her hand on the inscription and felt the rough scratches beneath her fingertips. "I am here, Papa," she whispered. "I found it."

Chapter V— The Venice Nobody Sees

Between explorations, Venice continued being Venice — impossibly beautiful, perpetually chaotic, and stubbornly alive. Elena walked to school every morning through a city that had been a movie set, a museum, a trading empire, and a work of art for over a thousand years. She crossed the Accademia Bridge as the morning sun turned the Grand Canal to liquid gold.

She bought a cornetto — an Italian croissant — from the bakery on Campo Santa Margherita, where the baker, Signor Rossi, had been making pastries since 1978 and refused to serve anyone who was in a hurry. "Breakfast is not fast food," he said every morning, as if it were a philosophical position.

The city had its own rhythms, different from any other place on Earth. There were no cars — transport was by foot or by water. The vaporetti — water buses — chugged along the Grand Canal with the dependability of London buses and the scenic quality of a cruise. **Gondolas** carried tourists who paid two hundred euros to be serenaded through the side canals by men in striped shirts. Delivery boats brought everything from Amazon packages to fresh fish, navigating the narrow waterways with a skill that made Formula One driving look easy.

But Venice was also a city of problems that tourists never saw. The population had dropped from 175,000 in the 1950s to fewer than 50,000 permanent residents. Young people left because there were no jobs, no affordable housing, and no future that did not involve selling souvenirs or driving water taxis. The **floods** were getting worse — the MOSE barrier system, a network of inflatable gates designed to protect the lagoon, helped but could not solve the fundamental problem: the city was built on wooden piles driven into mud, and the mud was slowly compressing under the weight of fifteen centuries of stone.

"Venice is not dying," Professor Manzoni told Elena one afternoon as they sat on the steps of the Zattere, watching the afternoon light play on the water. "That is what the newspapers say, but it is not true. Venice is changing. It has always changed — it was built by people who understood that living with water means adapting to water. The question is whether we adapt fast enough." She looked at Marco's map, spread across her knees. "Your father understood that. He knew that the underground spaces are not just history. They are clues — clues to how Venice was built, how it has survived, and how it might survive the next hundred years."

Chapter VI— The Network

Over the following two months, Elena and the team explored twelve more underground spaces marked on Marco's map. Each one was different. Beneath a disused warehouse in Castello, they found a medieval cistern — a brick-lined water storage chamber that had supplied drinking water to the neighbourhood for three hundred years before being sealed in the nineteenth century. Beneath a church in San Polo, they discovered a crypt that had been converted into a storage vault by Venetian merchants in the sixteenth century, its walls still bearing the painted marks of their trading companies.

The most extraordinary discovery was beneath the Campo dei Mori, a small square in Cannaregio. Marco's map showed a passage connecting the square to the **canal** behind it — a route that had been used, according to historical records in the city **archive**, by silk traders from the eastern Mediterranean in the thirteenth century. The passage was partially flooded but navigable, and its walls were covered with carved **inscriptions** in four languages: Italian, Greek, Arabic, and Armenian — evidence of the multicultural community that had lived and traded in medieval Venice.

Elena documented everything. She had learned her father's techniques: careful measurements with tape and laser, photographs from multiple angles, and detailed hand-drawn sketches that captured textures and spatial relationships that cameras could miss. She added her own innovations — 3D scanning with a borrowed device from the university, and a systematic photographic **archive** that linked each physical location to its position on the map. The map grew. Marco's blue and red ink was now joined by Elena's green — a colour she had chosen deliberately, to show that the work continued, that the conversation between father and daughter had not ended.

Professor Manzoni submitted a preliminary report to the Venetian heritage authority and to UNESCO, whose World Heritage Committee had been monitoring Venice's condition for years. The report described the underground network as "a previously undocumented archaeological and architectural resource of exceptional significance" and recommended immediate protective measures. The response was swift. A formal inspection team was assembled. International media picked up the story. The headline in the *Corriere della Sera* — Italy's largest newspaper — read: "The Girl Who Mapped the City Beneath Venice."

Chapter VII— The Opposition

Not everyone was pleased. The abandoned palazzo near San Zaccaria — the one with the Byzantine chamber — was owned by a development company called Adria Investments, which had plans to convert it into a luxury hotel. The discovery of significant archaeological remains beneath the building threatened the project with delays, additional costs, and the possibility that construction would be blocked entirely. Adria's lawyers contacted the heritage authority and argued that the underground spaces were structurally unsafe and should be sealed for public safety.

"Sealed means destroyed," Professor Manzoni told Elena bluntly. "Once you fill a chamber with concrete, the mosaics, the **inscriptions**, the entire historical record — it is gone forever. They do not care about safety. They care about their hotel." The city council was divided. Some members supported **conservation**. Others pointed out that Venice needed economic investment and that blocking development projects would drive away the few businesses still willing to invest in the city. The debate was familiar: preservation versus progress, history versus money, the past versus the future.

Elena fought back in the way she knew best: with information. She completed her father's map, adding every space the team had documented, and published it online with full photographs and descriptions. She created a website — "The Hidden Map of Venice" — that allowed users to explore the underground network virtually, comparing the modern city with the spaces beneath it. She gave interviews in Italian and English to journalists from a dozen countries. And she spoke at a UNESCO **symposium** in Paris — the youngest speaker in the event's history — about why underground heritage mattered.

"We spend billions protecting the buildings we can see," she told the audience. "The palazzos, the churches, the bridges. But beneath them is a second city — older, more fragile, and equally important. If we lose it, we lose the evidence of how Venice was built, how it traded, how it survived. We lose the instructions for saving it." The audience — academics,

diplomats, engineers — gave her a standing ovation. The UNESCO committee recommended that the underground network be included in Venice's existing World Heritage designation as a protected component.

Chapter VIII— The Decision

The Venetian Cultural Heritage Committee held its formal hearing in January, in the Palazzo Ducale — the Doge's Palace — in a room overlooking the lagoon. Elena thought her father would have appreciated the irony: the fate of Venice's hidden city being decided in its most visible building. The development company presented first, arguing for economic necessity. The heritage authority presented the scientific case for **conservation**. Professor Manzoni presented the archaeological evidence. And Elena presented the map — her father's life's work, completed by his daughter.

The committee's decision was measured and practical. The underground network would be designated as a protected heritage site. Development projects that might affect underground spaces would require archaeological assessment before construction could begin. A monitoring programme would be established to track water levels, structural stability, and environmental conditions in the documented chambers. And a public access programme — guided tours, educational visits, virtual exploration — would be developed to connect Venetians and visitors with the hidden history beneath their feet.

Adria Investments was not blocked entirely — the hotel project could proceed, but the Byzantine chamber had to be preserved and incorporated into the building as a heritage feature, accessible to the public. It was a compromise, and compromises never satisfied everyone. But it was enough. "Your father would be proud," Professor Manzoni said as they walked along the waterfront after the hearing. The winter sun was low over the lagoon, painting the water in shades of copper and pearl. A vaporetto passed, its wake lapping against the stone embankment in the rhythm that was the heartbeat of the city.

"He would say the work is not finished," Elena replied. "He would say there is always more to map." Manzoni smiled. "He would be right. Venice has been here for fifteen hundred years. We have explored perhaps five percent of what lies beneath it. That is five lifetimes of work, at least." She looked at Elena. "Are you interested?" Elena looked at the city — the domes, the towers, the light on the water, the invisible network of passages and chambers beneath her feet, waiting to be found. "I am interested," she said.

Chapter IX— The Map Continues

That evening, Elena did something she had not done in eighteen months. She sat at her father's desk. She picked up his mapping pen — a fine-tipped instrument with a rosewood handle that he had used for twenty years. She opened the leather portfolio containing the map and spread it across the desk. The surface was familiar: the weight of the paper, the smell of the ink, the quiet scratching sound the pen made on the archival surface. She could almost feel him beside her — his steady hand guiding hers, his patient voice explaining how to measure a curve, how to represent depth with line weight, how to make a flat piece of paper contain an entire world.

She picked up her green pen and began to add the final details from the team's most recent survey: a passage beneath the Fondamenta Nuove that connected to a fifteenth-century boatyard, its wooden beams still intact beneath the waterline. The pen moved across the paper with a certainty that surprised her. She was her father's daughter. She saw the city the way he had seen it — not just as a surface, but as a depth. Not just as a present, but as a past, a future, and everything between.

Matteo appeared in the doorway in his pyjamas. "You are using Papa's desk," he said. "Yes." "Are you okay?" She looked at her brother — eleven years old, trying so hard to be grown up, missing their father every day without knowing how to say it. "Come here," she said. He sat beside her, and she showed him the map. She pointed to the blue lines and explained what they meant. She showed him the X near San Zaccaria and told him about the mosaics. She traced the green lines — her lines — and showed him how the story continued.

"Can I add something?" he asked. She gave him a pencil. He drew a tiny cat in the corner of the map, near their palazzo. "That is Signora Benedetti's cat," he explained. "She predicts the **floods**. She should be on the map." Elena laughed — the first real laugh in a long time. "You know what, Matteo? You are absolutely right." She helped him label the cat ("Official Flood Prediction Officer") and they sat together at their father's desk until Chiara called them for dinner, the map spread between them like a shared language, a bridge between what was lost and what remained.

Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Cartographer	A person who draws or produces maps
Canal	An artificial or natural waterway used for transport or drainage
Gondola	A long, narrow flat-bottomed boat used on Venetian canals
Tide	The regular rising and falling of the sea caused by the moon's gravity
Flood	An overflow of water that covers normally dry land
Erosion	The gradual wearing away of rock, soil, or structures by water or wind
Foundation	The lowest load-bearing part of a building, usually below ground
Restoration	The process of returning something damaged to its original condition
Manuscript	A handwritten document, especially an old or valuable one
Landmark	A recognisable building, structure, or feature used to identify a location
Navigate	To find the way through a complex space or system
Archive	A collection of historical documents or records stored for reference
Conservation	The protection and careful management of the environment or heritage
Archaeology	The study of human history through the excavation of sites and artefacts
Inscription	Words carved or written on a surface, especially on stone or metal
Watermark	A line showing the level reached by water; also a faint mark in paper
Symposium	A formal meeting where experts discuss a particular subject
Subsidence	The gradual sinking of land or a building due to underground changes
Resilience	The ability of a system or community to recover from difficulties
Legacy	Something meaningful left behind for future generations

Comprehension Quiz

1. What had Elena's father been working on before he died?

- A) A novel about Venetian history
- B) A detailed hand-drawn map of Venice's hidden waterways and underground passages
- C) A photography book about Italian architecture
- D) A tourist guidebook for Venice

2. Why was the map so important?

- A) It was worth millions of euros
- B) It documented passages and chambers that were being lost to rising waters and erosion
- C) It showed the location of buried treasure
- D) It was needed for a school project

3. What was 'acqua alta'?

- A) A type of Italian coffee
- B) The exceptionally high tides that regularly flooded Venice
- C) A Venetian festival celebrated in summer
- D) A style of Venetian architecture

4. Who was Professor Manzoni?

- A) Elena's school headteacher
- B) A marine archaeologist who had worked with Elena's father
- C) A politician who wanted to build a new bridge
- D) A gondola driver with local knowledge

5. What did Elena discover beneath the abandoned palazzo?

- A) A modern art gallery
- B) A medieval chamber with Byzantine mosaics and her father's survey markers
- C) An underground restaurant
- D) A flooded car park

6. Why was the city council initially reluctant to act?

- A) They did not believe the passages existed
- B) Protecting the passages would delay a profitable hotel development project
- C) They thought Elena was too young to be taken seriously
- D) They had already solved Venice's flooding problem

7. How did Elena's campaign gain international attention?

- A) She paid for advertisements on television
- B) Her mapped discoveries and social media documentation attracted UNESCO and international media
- C) She won a lottery and bought a newspaper
- D) A celebrity visited Venice and mentioned her

8. What was the committee's final decision?

- A) To demolish all the old buildings
- B) To designate the underground network as a protected heritage site with monitored access
- C) To fill the passages with concrete
- D) To sell the map to a private collector

9. What did completing her father's map mean to Elena?

- A) She could sell it for a large profit
- B) It was a way of continuing his work, honouring his memory, and connecting with him
- C) She wanted to become famous
- D) She needed it for her university application

10. What is the main message of the story?

- A) That Venice is too damaged to save
- B) That documenting and protecting hidden heritage is an act of love — for a place, a person, and the future
- C) That maps are more important than buildings
- D) That young people should not explore old buildings

Answer Key

#	Ans	Question
1	B	What had Elena's father been working on before he died?
2	B	Why was the map so important?
3	B	What was 'acqua alta'?
4	B	Who was Professor Manzoni?
5	B	What did Elena discover beneath the abandoned palazzo?
6	B	Why was the city council initially reluctant to act?
7	B	How did Elena's campaign gain international attention?
8	B	What was the committee's final decision?
9	B	What did completing her father's map mean to Elena?
10	B	What is the main message of the story?

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