

According to Luke

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Sample Chapters for Novelunity
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1 Separation

The scalpel fell to the lab floor with a sharp jangle. Jana shrugged her hair back and reached down. Discarding the blade, she pulled a fresh one out of its wrapper. This was taking a long time, but she would not look up until she had separated the two panels on the bench before her.

That afternoon, in the stillness of an empty lab, with everyone else out to lunch, she had prepared for this: all the cleaning fluids were there, her tools were ready. This was the part she loved. She had pushed the panel under an illuminated magnifying glass and discovered a clear line of fixative. Taking a minute sample, she put it under the microscope: organic. Glue from the bones of old horses – the join was antique. Or, whoever had stuck the panels together knew what they were about, and used antique components. She had seen it before: fakes put together using an amalgamation of old stuff. What would this one prove to be?

She gazed at the face of the Madonna on the front panel. Beautiful – and the collar around her neck gorgeous: a St Luke Madonna, which Anita said was painted by the evangelist himself. What was underneath it? Surely, if it was meant to deceive ancient persecutors of Christians, the Madonna would be the image to hide. This was her life's fascination: mysteries from the past that baffled the modern mind.

It took her a full ninety minutes to detach the two sections. She inserted the last nylon wedge, one more lever: then the scalpel. They were two identical dilapidated pieces of poplar, and they separated reluctantly. What emerged took her breath away. There were glue remnants. There were eight holes that corresponded to the dowels still attached to the top panel. There were rough scrapings and areas that needed to be cleaned. But there was no doubt about it. The image she revealed was a hundred times more interesting than the 'black' Madonna on top.

Jana took a shallow breath and stared at the primitive picture. Sensational: a portrait, but so different from the one that had been stuck on top of it for centuries. An oval face, by no means beautiful, looked downward with dark asymmetrical eyes: a middle-eastern woman with a slight shadow on her upper lip, and a small gold earring visible under an opaque veil that draped over the bowed head. No nimbus, no halo. But she could just make out several small symbols in a wide arc all around the head and shoulders. They were visible in the x-rays. She peered at them, and at the shadows of eight dowels of a different wood type, which made impressions of different density.

'So who are you?' In an empty lab, talking to an ancient image was not overly eccentric. Not too feminine or overly saintly, the woman had an authoritative look. The lines on the forehead said a lot: an older woman, a wise one. The earring and the hardly visible streaks of grey hair under the veil were ably executed in encaustic paints, with outlines and symbols added afterwards with light brushstrokes.

When the curator from Rome was there, she had no idea there would be such a find. It was awkward then, but the x-rays on the light-box gave her the first inkling. Her suggestion of an extra layer made the priest ask whether it was a fake.

She went into some detail about how some holy artefacts were disguised as ordinary ornaments at certain stages of the Church's history. 'Antonio Zanetti, our historian, will have more to tell you about all this.' She had spoken drily to the unusual curator, while looking at him sideways. 'Early Christian persecution meant they made icons to fulfil a number of roles. Subterfuge is not necessarily modern.'

He brightened up and nodded in agreement, accepting her expertise without much comment. She was an art conservator, he was a priest; too handsome for a priest. They had sent him instead of some other Church official and he had no idea what to do. Irritated at the whole business, Jana was also at a loss, but she reassured him, although she had no idea why. On any other day, with any other curator, she would have resented having to explain everything. She did not say to him that she rarely had occasion to see such an ancient icon, but did call across the lab in her most businesslike voice to her colleague. 'Anita, have you had a look at these x-rays?'

Her assistant's eyes left the monitor for a moment, sensing the support Jana needed. 'The St Luke Madonna ones we took? Yes, they don't look right, do they?'

Jana had looked pointedly at the priest, and his expression changed instantly. She liked the way the simple confirmation lit up his face. She continued. 'Holy images, the older they are, can have quite a chequered history ... but you should have provenance papers and so forth.'

His face fell. 'I thought they were sent earlier. Monsignor Gardellor said the papers must never travel with the artefact. Is that right?'

'Depends.' She tried to temper her tone. It was clear he was out of his depth, and something else was making him awkward, slowing down the whole process. 'If the piece is very valuable, then yes, they travel separately. It's basic.'

He sensed her impatience. 'Look, this job was a kind of surprise. I was sent on this commission instead of ... instead of somewhere else.'

Jana hoped he would not embark on a long explanation she had no desire for. She was impatient for him to leave, to get on with examining the shots. Yet she wanted him to stay. He had an Australian accent not dissimilar to her own, which was curious, and made her wonder what he was doing in Venice, but it was not more interesting than the painting.

Looking at it now, lying on the sterile counter, she could not say it looked fresh: the colours had suffered the passage of the years. There were woodworm holes and mould; there was a serious liquid stain where moisture or some sort of grease had entered between the panels. Tonight, it had taken on even more mystery and posed more questions.

'Pre-Byzantine.' Her whisper sounded like a prayer in the silent lab. Her smile was a satisfied smile. This could take as long as it liked. The scientific dating process was a

long one, where they had to send scrapings to Germany, and she wished Gilbert had not left to join Johan. He would have been able to estimate a fairly accurate dating, first off.

Jana was certain of the importance of what she had found. The image underneath – the strange female portrait – *felt* important. She wanted to tell someone. She had Rob Anderson's mobile number somewhere. She reached for her phone, and paused. *Father* Rob Anderson's number. He was a priest. No matter how striking his looks, no matter his accent, he represented the Catholic Church in Rome, and as owners of the icon, they had every right to be first to know what she had uncovered. When he was there earlier, he did not seem to understand how they had made the negatives, so she had gone into a detailed explanation of how they took very long exposures. They also took images with a micro-converter and EBCCD camera that sent pictures to the computer. 'Don't ask me what that stands for,' she added quickly, when she saw his face. 'Something about bombarding things with electrons, that's all I know.' She knew more about it than that, and could not understand her own concern with his discomfort.

She took him to a computer screen and clicked a few times, telling him what the blurred grey image was when it came up. 'There is a long smudge at the bottom that's some sort of fixative, some sort of adhesive. We've seen that before.' She suspected there was more underneath the adhesive than she could see on the screen.

Now, she looked at the time on her phone, and checked it against the electronic clock on the lab wall. This was no hour to be calling anyone, priest or no priest, Rome or no Rome. She drummed fingers on the counter. It was too intriguing to put down. The blur at the bottom of the x-ray warranted investigation right away. She compared the negative outline with what had appeared when she detached the two panels.

Whoever had worked on this did it a very long time ago, but it was ably done. She took up the lancet and levered a particle of fixative – about the size of a small postage stamp – until she could see it was detachable in one piece. She put it aside. Every particle was accounted for. She placed the small fragment on the electronic scales and made a note, to be entered on the database later. Excitement did not mean she lost discipline. She was known to be meticulous, and continued to be so, but her lips twitched.

This was going to be as far from a textbook case as it was possible to get. On the counter before her was a disguised panel from pre-Byzantine times. They rarely used the word important to describe such pieces, but this picture merited the word. She had felt the rare stirring of excitement when showing the curator that morning.

He had turned back to the light box and pointed. 'What's this?'

'A double edge, see? Twice the depth and density: it looks like there are *two* pictures.' She pointed with her pencil. 'There's this outline here, of the image on the panel we can see. Then there's something else here.' Jana returned his gaze. 'No, I don't think it's a *pentimento*.' She saw his blank look. 'It's not an over-painting. Look

at this – the depth’s all wrong.’ She slipped another negative under the rim of the light box. Looking at it like that, with a priest looking over her shoulder and running his finger around his dog collar, made her feel odd.

Working on something that had been concealed for such a long time was every conservator’s dream. Now, Jana took a long breath, full of expectation and quiet confidence. Experience told her a number of things: there would be an inscription under the smeared layers of old glue. The name of the person pictured, their initials, or a prayer in some ancient language was sometimes inscribed along the bottom, asking the viewer to pray or make penance. She sighed and thought of all the hopeful eyes that had looked at such icons, and all the unfulfilled prayers. She loved her work, but thought little of the beliefs that travelled with the artefacts.

Scalpel steady, she prised and prodded, removing another particle of glue, this time from the right side. ‘Yes!’ She uncovered letters. ‘Aha!’ With a cotton bud laden with cleaning fluid, she tentatively swabbed a small section, but the glue that someone in the remote past had smeared onto the bottom of the image could not be removed so easily. She persisted, changing swabs and solutions until a few of the symbols were perfectly visible. She pulled up the illuminated magnifying glass, and slid the panel underneath.

‘Greek!’

Painstakingly, at an hour she was usually well on her way home, she managed to copy it all. Many symbols were missing, disappearing forever into oblivion and the mess of glue she had removed.

ΑΠΟ ΤΟ Α ΣΤΟ Ν ΕΝΩΝΩ Λ ...
ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥΣ ΣΥΝΤΡΟΦΟΥΣ ΤΗΣ. ΠΑΝΤΑ
ἩΜΩΝ ΕΙΔΟΥΣ ΤΟΥΣ
ΕΠΙΔΙΩΞΕΤΕ ΤΙΣ ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΜΟΥ

It was tricky to even try to translate old inscriptions with missing letters. There was ambiguity even in well-known prayers. She had seen bishops animated by the subtle difference two or three consonants could make. But translating was not her job. She was trained by the monks in Sacramento to copy exactly what she saw, and learned it was better not to know a language when one was copying, to avoid making mental leaps, or presumptions that would result in mistakes.

When she saved her notes on a portable drive, her head was full of images and memories: the monks in Sacramento, Greek letters, a mysterious woman painted without a diadem, a confused Australian priest. She rubbed her neck and stretched. The drive was tucked quickly into her tiny bag and she slung it across her chest. All she wanted now was a steamy shower, and to finish the bottle of white wine in her fridge.

All she wanted was home, a tiny flat behind the public gardens a quick walk away, over three bridges and along Riva dei Sette Martiri. It was a fleeting but comforting thought that she did not have to cater to anyone else's whims but her own. It was good to anticipate the night ahead, to relax, to think, and to do exactly as she pleased. A recently failed relationship taught her a lot about herself: she liked being alone. She did not relish sharing. The permanent scrutiny that came with a full-time relationship had failed to generate what some said would feel like *belonging*. Her mother was wrong. She was not lonely.

Out in the damp Venice air, she hurried past the Arsenale entry, where the rattle of the falling scalpel was in her head again, joining the clatter of her flat heels on the wooden bridge at Torri, louder than her jangling keys, and louder than the second sound of footsteps that turned when she turned.



2 Attack

The Paludio di Sant'Antonio was deserted. The dull lonely echo of Jana's footsteps rebounded off stone walls and flagstones underfoot. At the sudden sensation that someone paced right behind her she whirled and flinched at the blurred presence – less than a metre away – of a man. Surprise and panic hit her as he lunged suddenly, reaching for her shoulder. She gasped and pulled back.

'God!' She heard herself exclaim, but took two quick steps back. 'God!' She ducked when his hand shot out again, and swung the hand that held her keys, aiming for his face. But she missed. She grunted, tried again, but he hit her, sharply across the upper arm, so she lost balance. Falling to the flagstones and rolling, she heard a sound she knew came from her own chest, a deep groan as she exhaled.

A rough hand fumbled quickly for the bag slung around her body. She rolled away, but a sharp pain on one side and disbelief stopped her. *He kicked her.* He kicked her and as her bag was tugged, she felt his hand dip, seek, and retract so quickly she could not shift away to avoid it.

'Hey!' She shouted at last. 'Hey! You can't ... you – ...'

He was already bounding off. The only sound left was her gasping and her keys rattling once more when she kicked them as she rose. She brushed away tears of frustration, shrugged back her hair and dusted her sides. 'Ugh!' Panting, she stroked away imaginary dirt, and disgust with it. Her shoulders slumped, but she turned resolutely towards her front door, and squared them quickly, raising her chin. Consciously, she braced herself against frustration and the sense of being alone and vulnerable. She was alone, but she was fine. Nothing happened. The key turned quickly, and she was soon upstairs and under the shower.

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'There's a bruise on your chin.'

Jana was not sure whether she enjoyed the Australian priest's scrutiny.

'What happened?'

'It's nothing.'

'Okay.'

He was not going to press her for details, but it might be a relief to tell. 'I was mugged.' Noting the surprise in his eyes, she went on to tell him what happened the night she separated the panels. 'Someone followed me when I cut through to the Arsenale to take the wooden bridge past Torri.'

'When was this?'

‘Two nights ago – the night I separated the panels.’

‘How late was it? It can’t be safe to ...’

Why should he care? ‘Oh look – I’ve been walking home after dark for months. Venice is not what you’d call wild. Sometimes you get a gaggle of young men ...’ She paused. ‘This wasn’t that kind of thing at all. And I was that close to home. I thought I knew who it was, you see.’

Rob raised an eyebrow.

She cut in quickly. ‘But it wasn’t. And he tried to take my bag.’

‘What – that pouch thing you wear across ...’ He was observant.

‘Yeah, I sometimes take work home on a portable drive, one of those USB hard drives Johan bought.’ She gestured with her hands to signify a flat rectangular object a bit longer than a pack of cigarettes. ‘It’s gone. That’s all he took.’

‘Did you see what he looked like?’

‘Not really.’ Jana lowered her eyes – and remembered how surprised she was that it was not Giacomo. It was shock, rather than the attack, that had undermined her. She shivered and then shrugged. She was so wrong. But Giacomo had stalked her for so long she had grown used to the feeling. Thinking about it made her half forget she sat there with an Australian priest; the curator of the artefact she still found posed so many questions.

He had returned to the lab sooner than expected, eager to learn more about the icon. There was progress to show him, and he seemed pleased with what he saw, even though she had to explain each step.

‘I’m going to get a coffee.’ He dipped a hand into the pocket of his soutane. ‘Would you like one?’

‘Oh, if you’re going, a cappuccino would be nice.’

‘Grab your coat.’

Coat? She thought he meant he would whip down to the piazza and bring up cardboard cups. This man intended to walk out there with her – in his cassock or soutane or whatever the thing was called. A priest and a technician having a coffee together. How cosy.

‘Coming?’ There was something like amusement on his face.

They were lucky to get a shady table near Santa Maria Formosa. The place was full of tourists.

The priest angled his head to look at her chin. ‘Aren’t you going to report it?’

‘Anita did. A form went out to the police, and the insurance office will sort it out with Johan. It’s not a big deal – those things only cost about a hundred euros now. It held less than two gigs of material – the rest of the drive was empty.’

‘And you?’ His eyes were piercing, his gaze disconcerting.

She was not usually this put out by a direct stare. ‘I’m fine.’ She might as well say what was on her mind to this Australian who was something like a breath of fresh air from home.

He waited, shifting in the café chair, looking intently into his empty cup and then at her.

'I think they wanted what was on it.'

Rob Anderson sat up straight. His look altered with his posture. 'Oh?' He looked around the crowd and back at Jana. 'What was on it? Why do you think that?'

'The print-outs I made of my notes as well ... they disappeared yesterday afternoon – I put them on Antonio's desk. When I went back after an hour they weren't there.'

'He must have picked them up by mistake.'

'You don't know Antonio. He's too careful for that.'

'So you think the two incidents are connected?'

'I don't know. It happened too quickly. It was a shock.' She did not say she had thought the stalker was Giacomo, her ex-partner.

'Will you see a doctor?'

'Course not!' She raised a hand to her chin. 'It's nothing. It'll go dark blue and then yellow.'

He smiled at her practical ease.

'I have a funny feeling about this job.' She watched his expression as she said the words. 'This didn't feel like ordinary theft. They didn't take my wallet, just the USB drive. I can't explain – I got the feeling they were after what was on it – my notes about the icon.'

'Our icon?'

The unexpected way he said *our* suddenly connected them, made them some kind of unlikely team. Her stomach lurched uncomfortably. It was bad enough getting shaken about over an inexpensive device. Now this Australian priest was giving them a double role in whatever was going on.

She looked away. '*Your* icon.'



3 Death

A week into the restoration, Jana was still energized over the new work, still excited about the newly discovered panel. Every morning meant a mental plan that preceded a painstaking procedure to remove accumulated grime off the top icon, and repairing the worst damage that separation and deterioration had wrought on the bottom panel.

Even as she approached the office on Salizzada San Lio, well before the others arrived, she knew exactly how she would start. Enthusiasm and a sense of purpose filled her with something she approximated to contentment, without being too analytical about it. Opening the street door was the beginning. She would shrug off her coat as she took the stairs two by two.

Today, the door was open a crack. Antonio must have got there early too. She pushed it, and it gave a little, but something wedged it, something soft, like a bag of something. It was unusual for the cleaners to leave bags of rubbish inside the door. She pushed again. There was a smell, thick and salty. Jana hesitated, but pushed against the solid door until she could see what it was. A knee. Her sense of purpose and enthusiasm deflated instantly.

‘Good grief.’ With a shaking hand, she shoved until she could squeeze through, and then saw the pool of blood. Black blood, and her colleague Anita lay in it, her blonde hair sticky, her eyes open but unseeing.

‘Oh my god, oh my God. Anita!’ She dropped to a squat and felt inside her collar. ‘Anita...’ A rush of nausea rose to her throat. Her breath started to come in gasps and swallows. It was a moment before she could fumble for the phone in her bag. Shock and fear shuddered through her and she dropped things. The urge to run out into the street again, and as far away as she could get, was very strong. She started to rise, but she had to stay. This was Anita. ‘What happened? Anita, what happened?’

Tears of revulsion and horror made her speech breathy and high pitched. ‘Anita ... My colleague Anita. She’s dead!’ She had to repeat what she said several times to the woman on the phone, in Italian, and then in English. Did they understand her?

‘*Arriva subito la polizia locale.*’ The woman on the other end said words automatically. Did she mean them?

Jana leaned back against the wall, gulping and shaking, her hand pressed against her mouth. She had to stand. She had to move away, but her legs would not obey. With no idea how long she had crouched there, she knew she would feel dizzy if she rose suddenly. Suddenly? She could hardly move her fingers. Breathing deeply, she tried to still the waves of nausea. When her agitation started to settle, she tried again. No, she was still lightheaded and very shaky. Her deep breaths steadied her very gradually. She slid her back up against the wall. She heard herself mumble to herself, and yet was too shocked to cry.

She felt she had hardly stepped back from where she crouched when authoritative voices became loud behind the door. Surely the Venice police were not as prompt as the woman on the phone had promised. She must have cowered there in shock much longer than she realised. She could hardly move aside so they could open the door wide enough.

When he appeared, among a crowd of officers, the Italian inspector made her stammer. His first words were awkward. Jana could not think. 'I found her, it was me. Just there, at the foot of the office steps, right inside the door.'

'Yes, I can see.' He spoke calmly, as if this was the next dead body he had to see on that day.

'And the blood isn't red, it's ...'

'Aha, yes.' He gestured her away from the stairwell, leading her to where she could not see the body. 'I am Ispettore Manfrè. You must tell me if there is...'

'I ... I had to push against her because she was ... well, she was wedging the door shut.'

'Is there anyone upstairs?' he insisted.

'Yes... *no*, I don't know. There couldn't be.'

She talked on, and he listened. As he did, he gestured for one of his men to go upstairs, and smoothly asked for details: the time she had found the German girl's body, if she heard any noise upstairs, if anyone ran past her. He was patient, making her feel he was used to this; used to the dozen different ways shock came to those with little experience of violence.

He looked for tell-tale signs, seemed to be checking some list in his head for behaviour that suggested the holding back of truths, reciting of rehearsed half-truths, and manufacturing of outright lies. He looked at Jana's eyes, the way her fingers shook. He noted the way she refused a cigarette, accepted coffee, and asked for her colleagues.

'Where's Antonio?' She asked for a third time.

Manfrè wrote the name Antonio in his book, accompanied by two squat question marks. He did not make a sound, did not raise his eyes from his notebook, but looked at Jana's soft casual loafers, her thin jeans. 'And you have been in Venice how long?' Was she so obviously a foreigner?

He took in the way her left foot turned nervously inward. He wrote a word or two and clicked his pen closed, then un-clicked it again.

'Tell me again about the night before, Miss Hayes.' He chose to speak to her in English, knowing her passable Italian, when she was in such a state, would not suffice. He made her repeat her answers. Witnesses often feared repetition, in case it tripped them up. What did she say her job was? Restoration technician – technician, she said twice, and artist once.

'The blood ...' Jana's eyebrows met over her small nose in a grimace that heralded tears. 'Her husband must be ...'

Manfrè's hand touched her elbow, ever so lightly. 'Aha, a husband.' Then he turned and looked her straight in the eye. 'No, no.'

'What?'

'Do not think about Anita now. I want you to think about yesterday, and about the last few days. Tell me about the last few days. *Gli ultimi giorni ... il giorno prima*. Let's start with ... let's say, Thursday of last week, the twenty-third. Okay?'

Jana closed her eyes and started to sift through the events of the last few days. Was it all relevant? She started to talk. It was all so clear. She remembered every detail of the week since the St Luke Madonna arrived, but telling him about it was not making it better. She felt worse. Much worse than being stalked by a man who had difficulty understanding their relationship was over. She shrugged off all thought of Giacomo and concentrated.

'First,' she said again, 'my USB drive was taken forcibly.'

'How long ago?'

'Last Tuesday.' Three days ago. And her laptop was ruined. She looked down. Anita's blood began to congeal around it, spoiling the case and seeping into the contents.

'Sorry - please do not move it, *signorina*.' A policeman got in the way, fielding her with outstretched fingers when she attempted to lift it away from the mess.

'But ...'

'We shall let you have it back, but first we take photos, and then the inspector must have a look, then fingerprints.'

She shrugged and resigned herself to the slow process. This was no coincidence. It was all linked, and it did not help to have what seemed like dozens of people milling about, asking questions, touching and measuring things and generally upsetting everyone at Zona Scientifika.

She shivered and hauled herself onto her lab stool, wishing it was all over. Wishing none of it had happened at all. Ispettore Manfrè was unsettling. Now that they all moved away and she was alone she shivered at how he had looked at parts of her that seemed unrelated; her hands, the fabric of her trousers, or her long brown hair. Did he sense her omissions, irrelevant as they were?

She could not possibly describe the full extent of her feelings about the way she had discovered Anita. She was sickened, confused and shaken. He could see that. She would not tell him about her reaction to that morning's simple email from her mother. And how could she tell him how she felt about the Australian priest?

She was still nauseated about the door being jammed against the backs of Anita's legs, and having to push against them to get in. Dropping her laptop as she did so, she had touched Anita's neck with the back of her fingers, seeking the pulse she so desperately hoped was there. It was too late. She was long dead. But she must have still been alive to move against the door like that.

She had already told Manfrè about that, so she told him how the icon had arrived, left out details about the x-rays, though said she had worked on it for a full six days. But her mind was on that morning. The fumbled call on her tiny phone created, in an irrationally short space of time, a whirlwind of activity, loud voices, and a crowd blocking Salizzada San Lio. Now a troop of *Polizia Locale*, who had arrived on foot from the nearby *questura*, cordoned it off. The sight of uniformed police drew even more curious locals. More men and women in uniform arrived in a police launch, hurrying the rest of the way on foot, crowding the stairs. The inspector remained unruffled.

It was a good two hours before she could make any sense of the confusion as she was shifted back and forth, from one room to another, then into the boardroom, wondering whether she should ask for some water, or go to the bathroom.

‘The weapon was a narrow blunt instrument.’ The inspector droned on in a matter of fact way, possibly aware of the effect his words would have. But he hardly looked at her face. ‘Like a spanner or wheel brace. Two sharp strokes.’ His eyes never left his notebook and his expression never changed. ‘We have not found it.’ He wrote in his book. ‘Is there such an instrument in use in your laboratory? Something heavy...?’

She felt sick. ‘No ... heavy? No.’ She thought of scalpels, tweezers. Nothing heavy enough to kill Anita. Nausea rose again and she leaned against a wall. Anita was a co-worker who had become a friend. Now she was gone, killed with wheel brace – or a spanner. Something heavy. A crushing sensation made her hand fly from stomach to temple.

Manfrè spoke without looking at her. ‘You need some water. *Dell’acqua ... prego ... si*’ He signalled to a policewoman.

The shock had hit her when she was already wound up. For hours she was numb, now it all flooded back. There was her mother’s email that morning, which did not make her happy. Not that she had said anything about age or time or babies, but the feeling was there, and Jana deeply resented it. An old school friend of Jana’s in Melbourne was getting married, her mother announced, and the words her mother wrote made her feel distinctly as if her whole life was empty. On top of everything she said she wanted to visit her in Venice: not an exciting prospect. She would criticise how Jana lived, her solitary ways and her dogged independence.

She levered her heels onto the chair rail, reaching out to steady herself. If she fainted, she would topple and cause another distraction. She did not want that. A metallic taste fouled her mouth. ‘*She’s really dead.*’

‘Can you stand? You were nearly out cold there. Are you alright? No, no ... sit, sit down.’ It was Rob Anderson, who held out a steadying hand, a glass of water in the other.

She put her hand over his on her arm, and quickly took it away.

'They grabbed me when I arrived. I've been downstairs for a very long time, in fact. I ... um ... I administered last rites.'

'But she was dead.' She took the glass and looked at it.

'We can do that. Drink it.'

'Did you know she was Catholic? She gave up alcohol for Lent.' She was not making sense.

'Yes.' The priest stood back. 'You're very pale.'

'I'm fine,' she said, even though she was not sure she would make it to the rest room down the hall. Without a word, she gave him the glass and walked away, studiously straight and intent, like a drunk.

It was not until much later that he found her once more. He bore a cup of coffee. And he remembered how she took it.

She had no idea how the next hours flew except that she was closely questioned for the third time about how her laptop came to be soaked in blood. Ispettore Manfrè continued to observe her calmly as if she were some exotically dressed foreigner. All she experienced were jumbled thoughts. She *was* a strangely dressed foreigner. She had touched the body. She did drop her laptop. She was utterly confused, and there was no one to help.

'You have someone to go home to?' For the first time, the inspector looked directly into her eyes.

'I ... no.' She was reluctant to say she had no one. The Australian seemed, in these restless grey hours, like the only one who cared or was interested in how she felt. Johan Berg, her boss, who returned urgently from a trip to Budapest, was the most beleaguered by the incident, and did not have time or thought to comfort her. He had spent the afternoon on a plane and was tired too. He raked blond hair and beard with his fingers, his face plainly showing his anxiety. All he said was that he had left Gilbert behind in Budapest. Antonio was nowhere to be seen. What could Antonio do? She had no one.

But Rob Anderson cared. 'I know.' He kept saying the words. 'I *know*.'

How could he possibly know? He was being comforting. He probably had training in this kind of thing. Anita was not a relative – hardly any of them had relatives in Italy – but she felt grief and a sense of loss. She was also mystified about it all. 'Why do you think they were so violent? What did they want?'

Rob sat in an office chair, in slacks and a polar fleece jumper with a neckline that vaguely resembled his priest's collar. 'I've been thinking a lot about that.'

Jana looked up at his tone, which seemed to suggest he knew more than he was willing to tell. 'Thinking what?'

He looked about him, as if nervous of his surroundings. 'Um – yeah ...' The violent death had unsettled them all. 'It's disturbing, this business.'

Jana was not to be put off so lightly. She knew he was trying to make up his mind. It surprised, and alarmed, her that she could tell what he was thinking, as if he had plainly spoken his unease. 'You don't want to talk here, right?'

He nodded candidly, like they had been communicating that way for years.

It was a relief to get away. The inspector cleared them to go, looking from one to the other without a word. Within ten minutes, they were seated outside Santa Maria Formosa. It was evening, and lights had come on in the square.

'You get one shot at it.' Despondent words were the only ones she could summon, but she felt distinctly better now that she was out in the open.

'Yeah, well, I haven't organised it in my own head yet.' The priest responded with some surprise.

Jana tilted her head. She tried a smile but failed. He thought she was giving him one shot at an explanation. 'No, no. I mean ... everything we do in life. We just get one shot at it, and that's it. And I'm thirty-one.'

'I'm sorry?' There was a crease on the bridge of his nose and he tilted his head and waited, as diplomatic as a confessor. As unlikely looking a priest as she had ever seen.

'We can't rewind, can we? Here we are, back in this place, with two identical coffees. And just a matter of hours ago, Anita was alive – things were so different.'

His look suggested he knew what she was thinking. 'Not that different.'

She stared at him pointedly, not willing to contradict him. She held a hand up to each cheek, wondering if she was still as pale as he said she was earlier. 'Let's walk.' She rose and led the way from the cluttered tables.

He caught up as she rounded the corner to take the bridge at Calle del Paradiso. 'You really should go home.'

Jana was not to be placated. She did not need counselling: there was something on her mind. And she did not want to go home. She dug fists in pockets, squared her shoulders and walked on.

'Anita is dead.' The statement sounded oddly reassuring the way he said it. 'That's irreversible, I know. I'm very sorry.' There was that crease between his eyebrows.

'I hope so.' Her rebuttal was so Australian she hoped he would take on her candour. 'Tell me what you have been thinking.'

'Well ...' He hurried along at her Venetian pace. 'This might not be the right time.'

'Please. It's been a long day. Go ahead.'

'I know what you'll say.'

'Try me.'

'I have reread some of Saint Luke.' There was resignation in his voice. They would do what she wanted.

'And?'

'I found stuff that could tell us a bit about the woman on the panel underneath. Who she could be.'

'Did you really?' Disbelief made her slow slightly. She knew too little about the gospels to make a credible comment, but she was curious. A bit of the day's distress started to dissipate. This was what she needed, what she liked. A dilemma to get everything else off her mind. 'Tell me more.'

'Before I do, let's talk about the digital photos you took of the picture underneath.'

He was stalling. She took a deep breath. 'Okay – photos.' She remembered peering through the viewfinder and looking at the little LCD screen, taking close shots and distant shots, details of the face, earring, and grey hair. She remembered puzzling about the lack of a halo: if not a saint, if not a Madonna, then who? She told him she took pictures of the inscription, the dowel holes. There were about eighty-six shots; all the SD card could hold. 'I downloaded them onto the laptop, right? Which is now with the police.' And the card, kept in the laptop case, was most probably sodden with blood.

'What a mess.' He mumbled as they neared another bridge at Calle Balbi, and stopped to allow a troop of loud German tourists past.

'Well – it's not such a disaster, if that's what you mean. I made PDF files of all the pictures, and shot them over to the office computer.' He looked at the crease in her forehead. 'Are you all right? Perhaps you should have something to eat.'

'I'm fine.' She put out a hand to stop him. She needed to concentrate. 'Perhaps that's what the intruders were after, as well as the icon – is that what you think? And killed Anita for ... for ...' A sudden spate of anger almost brought tears to her eyes.

There was silence for a moment. The bridge was clear, and they crossed it.

He let her recover. Looking to either side, he seemed to wonder where she was heading. The mysteries of Venetian direction were clear on his face, and concern for her muddled his expression. But Jana was listening when he said, 'Anita emailed a few of them to me. That's what I'm trying to tell you. You were busy – you've been working on this for more than a week.'

'Oh! Do you think it was why she was *killed*?'

'Impossible to know.'

She turned to face him. 'First, my notes disappeared, then my drive was taken, then Anita – but there wasn't anything taken from the office. The icon is still in the safe, but ...' A thought occurred to her. 'You think I'm ... do you think it's dangerous to ...' Her hand rested on the cold stone of the bridge. She pulled it away as their eyes connected.

'You think this is becoming dangerous too.'

She had to admit it was not a comfortable feeling. The numbness of the day was starting to thaw. A niggles of fear threatened. She looked around at bright shop windows and crowds of tourists. They were on the Mazaria de l'Orologio, not a hundred metres from Piazza San Marco, where it was

impossible to feel anything but overwhelmed by the Venetian closeness: a claustrophobic sense that one was never further away from another human being than

about two metres. Never further away than a few arm spans from scrutiny and observation. Nothing could happen here.

Her stomach, however, said otherwise. She walked close to a shop window and leaned against its frame to disguise a moment's unsteadiness. She had to keep talking. 'There's more to this than we know.' She had to admit that much. 'I heard Johan telling the inspector that all files connected with the Madonna job were wiped off our computers, or perhaps downloaded. Everything, including the EBCCD shots.'

'What do you think that means?'

'My portable drive must have been stolen for that very reason. No drive, no files. They knew exactly what to take.'

Rob nodded. 'Did you erase them from the camera card?'

'No. But it's useless now. It's full of bl-. Doesn't really matter, except for the waste of time. We still have the icon. Nothing's happened to it or the panel underneath.'

'It's the only thing they did not manage to take. This was planned, and it looks very much like it went wrong at the last minute.'

'They didn't mean to kill her, you mean.'

A passing tourist caught her words and looked pointedly at her as he stepped away.

Jana turned a corner to avoid the square, and they crossed another bridge on the way to San Zaccaria. 'She disturbed them. That's it – she got there at the wrong time.' She raised a hand to her face. 'Poor Anita ...'

The priest knew it was useless to suggest she rested when she marched on. He understood she needed distraction, so he went on. 'So the information about the icon is just as important. Do you know why?' Rob was breathless as he walked along. He had noted earlier it was possible to distinguish locals from tourists simply from the speed of their stride. Venetians fairly flew over bridges and swerved around corners as if they were on wheels rather than feet.

'I don't know.' The importance of the icon was still a mystery to Jana.

'And the only shots we have are half a dozen x-ray negatives and the few jpegs Anita emailed to me,' he reiterated.

'And anything that's salvageable from my laptop, whenever the police let us have it back.'

'You can safely forget about it.' His look suggested he knew the ways of Italian bureaucracy. 'It'll be years.'

It was a depressing thought. 'Where did you look at the ones Anita sent you?' For a minute, she had a mental image of this priest sitting at an internet café, browsing through holy images among game-playing, porno-watching youths in a smoke-filled room. There was an Internet café at Rialto where such a scene was commonplace.

'I did it on the computer at the convent.'

'What convent?'

'When we travel, we are billeted with nuns or monks. Here in Venice, we stay at the Carmelites. It's a little house near the railway station, not far from the Scalzi Bridge.' He pointed to his left.

Jana flipped a thumb over her shoulder. 'It's that way.' For the first time that day, she smiled.

He shrugged. 'There are three Christian brothers there at the moment and an English Dominican monk here to study early Venetian Italian. He's a bit old and dodderly, and very talkative, Father Xavier Dunn, but he knows his ancient languages.'

'So where are the pictures now?'

'Since they are so sought after, I'd better not tell. That's a strange portrait, the one you discovered. You said so yourself. We don't know much about it, and want to know more ... and perhaps someone else does too.'

'Could that be the reason behind the break-in?' Her arms dropped to her sides in disbelief. 'The second picture?'

Rob stopped and looked out across the lagoon to San Giorgio. They stood on the broad much-photographed walk, where reflections of Venice lights shimmered in the water. Then he looked further. 'What it looks like to me is that someone will do anything to get their hands on it, and it's dangerous ... whether you know the reason or not.'

She sensed he had more to say, so she strode on towards the public gardens. She wondered whether he would follow her around all night if he had to.

