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The First Apostle

James Becker

I

For a few moments Jackie Hampton had no idea what had awoken her. The digital display on the radio alarm clock showed 03:18, and the master bedroom was entirely dark. But something had penetrated her slumber – a sound from somewhere in the old house.

Noises weren' t unusual – the Villa Rosa had stood on the side of the hill between Ponticelli and the larger town of Scandriglia for well over six hundred years – the old wood creaked and groaned, and sometimes cracked like a rifleshot, in response to changing temperatures. But this sound must have been something different, something unfamiliar.

Automatically she stretched out her hand to the other side of the bed, but her probing fingers met nothing but the duvet. Mark was still in London and wouldn't be flying back to Italy until Friday evening or Saturday morning. She should have been with him, but a last-minute change in their builders' schedule had forced her to stay behind.

And then she heard it again – a metallic pinging sound. One of the shutters on the ground-floor windows must have become unlatched and was banging in the wind. Jackie knew she wouldn't get back to sleep until it was secured. She snapped on the light and slipped out of bed, slid her feet into her slippers and reached for the gown draped over the chair in front of the dressing table.

She switched on the landing light and walked briskly down the wide oak staircase to the central hall. At the foot of the stairs, she heard a noise again – slightly different to the previous sound, but still unmistakably metal on stone – and it was obviously coming from the huge living room that occupied most of the ground floor on the east side of the house.

Almost without thinking, Jackie pushed open the door. She stepped inside the room, turning on the main lights as she did so. The moment the two chandeliers flared into life, the source of the metallic knocking sound became obvious. She raised her hands to her face with a gasp of fear, then turned to run.

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A black-clad figure was standing on a dining chair and chipping away with a hammer and chisel at a section of the plaster over the massive inglenook fireplace, his work illuminated by the beam of a torch held by another man. Even as Jackie backed away, both men turned to look at her with startled expressions on their faces. The man with the torch muttered a muffled curse and began running towards her.

'Oh God, oh God, oh God.' Jackie sprinted across the wide hall, heading for the staircase and the safety of the master bedroom. The wood on the door was over an inch thick and there was a solid steel bolt on the inside. Beside the bed was an extension phone, and her mobile was in her handbag on the dressing table. If she could just get inside the room, she knew she'd be safe and could call for help.

But she wasn't dressed for running, and the man behind her was. The slipper fell off her right foot as she reached the third stair, and she could hear the pounding of her pursuer's trainers on the stone-flagged floor of the hall, just yards behind her. Her feet scrabbled for grip on the polished wooden treads, then she stumbled, missed a step and fell to her knees.

In an instant the man was on her, grabbing at her arm and shoulder.

Jackie screamed and twisted sideways, kicking out with her right leg. Her bare foot smashed into the man's groin. He moaned in pain, and in a reflex action swung his torch at her. The heavy-duty aluminium tube crashed into the side of Jackie's head as she tried to stand. Dazed, she lurched sideways and grabbed at the banister, but her grasping fingers missed it. She fell heavily, her head smashing into the rail, instantly breaking her neck. Her body tumbled limply down the staircase and came to rest on the hall floor, her limbs spread out, blood pouring from the wound on her temple.

Her pursuer walked down the stairs and stood over her. The second intruder appeared from the door to the living room and looked down at the silent and unmoving figure. He knelt beside her and pressed his fingertips to the side of her neck.

After a moment he looked up angrily. 'You weren't supposed to kill her,' he snapped. Alberti looked down at his handiwork and shrugged. 'She wasn't supposed to be here. We were told the house would be empty. It was an accident,' he added, 'but she's dead and there's nothing we can do about it.'

Rogan straightened up. 'You're right about that. Come on. Let's finish what we've got to do and get out of here.'

Without a backward glance, the two men returned to the living room. Rogan picked up the hammer and chisel and continued to chip away at the remaining sections of old plaster above the huge stone lintel that spanned the entire width of the fireplace.

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The work took very little time, and in some twenty minutes the entire area was exposed. Both men stood in front of the fireplace, staring at the letters carved into one of the stones.

'Is that it?' Alberti asked.

Rogan nodded uncertainly. 'It looks like it, yes. Get the plaster ready.'

As Alberti left the room carrying a bucket to collect some water, Rogan removed a highresolution digital camera from his pocket and took half a dozen shots of the stone. He used the screen to check that they all clearly showed the inscription carved on it. Then, for good measure, he wrote down the words in a small notebook.

Alberti reappeared with the water. From the detritus left by the builders, he picked a wooden mixing board and trowel, then selected a bag of plaster from the pile stacked against one wall. A few minutes later, once he had a firm mix, he carried the board over to the fireplace.

The lintel rested on a steel plate, obviously a fairly recent repair to compensate for an unsightly crack that ran diagonally through the stone about two feet from the left-hand edge. The steel projected about half an inch in front of the lintel, and provided a firm base for the plaster.

Alberti clearly had some experience of the technique, and in about half an hour had produced a smooth and professional finish that neatly matched the new plaster on the righthand side of the fireplace. The other side still had old plaster on it – the builders hadn't got that far yet – but there was nothing they could do about that.

Fifty minutes after Jackie Hampton died, and almost ninety minutes after the two Italians had forced the rear door of the house, they walked away from the property, heading for the nearby lane where they'd left their car.

II

Chris Bronson swung his silver Mini Cooper into a space on the second floor of the Crescent Road multi-storey car park, which was directly opposite the police headquarters in Tunbridge Wells. For a few moments he sat in the driver's seat, lost in thought. This morning, he anticipated, was going to be difficult, very difficult.

It wasn't the first time he'd had problems with Harrison, though the way he was feeling it might well be the last. Detective Inspector Thomas Harrison – 'Tom' to his few friends, and 'the fat bastard' to almost everyone else – was Bronson's immediate superior, and they hadn't got on from day one.

Harrison considered himself to be an old school policeman, who'd come up through the ranks, as he never tired of telling anyone who asked and most people who didn't, and he resented Bronson for a number of reasons. The DI was particularly scathing about 'smartarse coppers': officers who joined the

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force after university and enjoyed certain privileges as a result. He'd lumped Bronson in with this group, though he didn't have a degree and had joined the army on a short-service commission straight from school. In short, Harrison believed that Bronson – who he normally referred to as 'Death Wish' – was just 'playing' at being a policeman: the fact that he was clearly a highly competent officer cut no ice with him.

In the six months that Bronson had been stationed at Tunbridge Wells he'd been reprimanded virtually on a weekly basis by Harrison for something or other but, because he really did want a career in the police force, he'd tried his best to ignore the man's obvious dislike. Now he'd had enough.

He'd been told to report to the station early that morning, and Bronson thought he knew exactly why. Two days earlier, he'd been involved with other officers – uniformed and plain clothes – in the apprehension of a gang of young men suspected of dealing in Class A substances. The gang's normal turf was East London, but they'd recently expanded their operations into Kent. The arrests hadn't gone as smoothly as everyone had hoped and in the resulting scuffles two of the young men had suffered minor injuries. Bronson suspected that Harrison was going to accuse him of using unnecessary force during the arrest, or even assaulting a suspect.

He climbed out of the car, locked it and walked down the stairs – the lifts in the car park didn't start running until eight – to the street.

Ten minutes later he knocked on the door of DI Harrison's office.

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