



BookBrowse

The Jesus Thief

by J.R. Lankford

Chapter 1

Wednesday p.m., January 12—Turin, Italy

For the better part of his forty-two years, Dr. Felix Rossi had wanted to be here in the Capella Della Sacra Sindone, the chapel at the top of the stairs in the Duomo, Turin's Renaissance cathedral, when priests came to open the tabernacle. Only six times before in the twentieth century had it happened and rarely in the presence of anyone but the priests. He'd wanted to stand beneath Guarini's famous glass-paned dome as the sun cast dazzling kaleidoscopes of brilliance down through the tabernacle's iron gates. The day had, at last, arrived.

In awe he waited with Father Bartolo, black marble beneath their feet, a white marble balustrade surrounding them, angels at each end. Everywhere in this chapel its designer, Guarini, had put statues of angels. For over four hundred years they had been here—blowing trumpets, playing harps, flying on spread wings, hovering in a frozen watch as they guarded Christianity's most famous relic. Sunlight flashed off the pair of gold Cherubs above the gates and the two Archangels leaning on their staffs as if to regard only him. In the brilliant light, Felix Rossi could barely see, but he couldn't look away. He would remember this moment until he died.

No one spoke as two priests climbed on the altar to open the tabernacle's iron gates and withdraw a silver casket. In 1509, Marguerite of Austria commissioned it for its special purpose on condition that a daily mass be said for her. Five feet long, one foot square, and encrusted with jewels, it was tied with red ribbon and sealed with red wax.

Within it lay the Shroud of Turin.

Slowly, carefully, they handed it down to Felix, who for this occasion represented science, and to Father Bartolo who represented faith—an often-uneasy alliance, but not today. Felix had quietly assembled the team of experts that waited to examine the Holy Shroud. It had undergone two previous scientific investigations—one in 1978, one in 1988. His would be the third.

Through a new Pontifical Custodian of the Shroud, the Church had picked him, over objections from a bishop who thought Felix's looks drew too much notice from young women. The Custodian had pointed out Felix's dual Harvard MD-PhD in medicine and microbiology, his much-recognized and objective scientific approach, that he was Catholic, devout, and philanthropic toward the church. The bishop was overruled. In exchange, Felix asked only for secrecy regarding his work on the Shroud, though it was the focus of his life.

But with his dreams about to come true, he looked away from the silver casket and felt the coldness of the marble room, smelled the suffocating residue of centuries of burning incense, its smoke rising from the cathedral to help the prayers of the faithful climb.

For this ceremony, the cardinal wore the red biretta on his head, had dressed in a red cassock, a knee-length white surplice atop. He lifted high a silver crucifix and said, "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti Amen," then crossed himself. The others did the same. Felix was slow to move his hand and did so mechanically, hoping no one noticed. Then eight priests in black cas-socks and white surplices made a double line behind the cardinal.

Nodding to old Bartolo, Felix lowered his end of the casket to bear the greater portion of its weight. He and Bartolo came down the two steps from the balustrade and rounded the altar, following the priests. Until 1865 this had been the chapel of the Dukes of Savoy—who became Italy's royal family—and an entrance to the palace's west wing remained. There, in the sacristy, the scientists would work.

Cameras flashed when they stepped into the long, gilded hallway. The photos wouldn't appear in the press because these were church photographers, making a record for the scientists and the priests. A woman among them flushed when she caught Felix's gaze and without thought, he angled his head and let his black hair fall in his eyes so he wouldn't see her—as if he'd taken vows with the priests. He wanted nothing to distract him from the dignity of this procession, though Felix knew something already had.

On the surface it was as planned—he in his white lab coat, Father Bartolo in black, the silence broken only by the slow, measured tread of their feet and the whine of cameras. From the solemnity of the few trusted observers in the hall, the casket might have held a man who died yesterday, not an image on an ancient linen cloth.

They entered the sacristy and conversations stopped.

Felix and Father Bartolo placed the casket on a long wooden table. Then Felix went to stand with his scientific team, all of them dressed in white lab coats and surgical gloves. They stood deferentially aside and made room for him. He was their superior in science, unswerving in his faith.

Not one of them would guess he was a Jew.

Until two hours ago, Felix himself hadn't known. The word rang in his mind—the sound of it, the idea of it—and made all else recede.

He watched the priests cut the crimson ribbon, open the casket, and remove what appeared to be a bolt of crimson taffeta. When they unwound it, a faintly dank scent arose. Lifted, the taffeta revealed the Holy Shroud of Turin, its linen the color of milk-laced tea.

For a moment no one moved.

The scientists, the observers against the walls, the priests about the room, the Poor Clare nuns who'd stitched the Shroud's special backing and would remove it, all seemed transfixed by this Sacred Linen on which so few had ever directly gazed.

Felix paid no attention to the quiet prayer being said:

O Blessed Face of my kind Savior

by the tender love

and piercing sorrow
of Our Lady as she beheld You in
Your cruel Passion,
grant us to share in this
intense sorrow and love
so as to fulfill the holy will
of God to the utmost

In his mind, he was back in his suite at the Turin Palace Hotel two hours earlier. His sister, Frances, was calling from New York to tell him Enea, their aunt, their last living relative, had died from her long illness. Before she passed away, she'd given Frances a key and a locked box full of letters—one addressed to him in his father's hand. Stumbling over the Italian, Frances read a few over the phone—letters to their parents from relatives in Italy they'd never heard of, unmailed responses written by their mother in Italian. Over and over he heard the words Ebreo, Italian for Hebrew, Nazi and sinagoga. Felix had paced in confusion, listening to descriptions of old passports with their parents' photos, but the passports carried an unfamiliar surname: Fubini. Eventually, Frances said the obvious aloud. Their parents had left Italy to escape the Nazis during the war because they were Jews. Why did they hide this fact? They'd come from Turin, this very town.

As the scientists went to work around him, uncovering their sterile instruments, Felix noticed that his friend, Father Bartolo, remained at the end of the table. He was a kind, frail priest who ought to be in bed. This morning, Felix had examined him in his cell and encouraged him to stay there, but Felix had known only death would keep Bartolo away. The priest's beliefs were simple—Jesus, God's Son, had lain under this Shroud. Bartolo's gaze was always fixed on his own inner light of truth unless something caught his interest. Then his eyes locked on and followed. Presently they were focused on Felix. Max also watched. He was a Jewish scientist Felix had picked for the team and because of his credentials the church had quickly approved. Max lived in Turin and had taken Felix home last night to share in Max's joy as the family named a new daughter in a touching ceremony full of music, poetry, candles, and Hebrew prayers.

Felix felt self-conscious under their gazes, as if two Gods vied for him through them. Who was he now, if not a man for whom Christ's passion had been the guiding symbol of his life?

Felix Rossi, his heart aching, moved from the tapestried wall where he'd stood. He approached the wooden table, preparing to look down on the face he loved.

Chapter 2

Same Wednesday, in the morning—New York

When the wind blew the Graham Smith hat off Maggie Johnson's head and rolled it down the empty upper Fifth Avenue sidewalk, she thought she'd just about die. It had taken six months of saving, three more of waiting, to own it. Graham Smith made hats for royalty, for aristocrats to wear to

Ascot. He made hats for the Queen. Now he'd made one for Maggie Johnson of Harlem, New York, too. At the moment, it was blowing down the street.

In spite of the spectacle she knew she was making, Maggie yanked off her winter white heels, dyed to match the silk in the hat. She ran after it like a track star, fearful it would blow across the street into Central Park. Luckily, the hat stopped under the canopy that stretched from Dr. Rossi's building to the curb. The red carpet had slowed it down. Maggie grabbed it, dropped her shoes, and stepped back into them, inspecting the hat. It seemed unharmed. She put it carefully on her head, one gloved hand holding the wide brim, the other holding the ostrich feathers in place.

Sam the doorman emerged in his long green coat and hat, looking her up and down, his ruddy Irish face grinning. He swung the heavy door wide by its brass handle.

"Maggie, my girl," he said, teasing. "You must be off to the races with the Queen in that lovely hat. Where did you ever find it?"

Angry and embarrassed that he'd probably seen her sprinting down the sidewalk, she rushed past him. Her hand skimmed the brass railing as she went down the carpeted marble stairs, then through the lower lobby to the elevators. On her left was an old mural from some Italian palace. It showed rich folks out hunting with their dogs. In front of her were floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Waving one hand to cool herself, she smoothed her winter white dress and made sure her hat was straight, remembering not to primp because of the security cameras. She'd heard even the tenants forgot and gave the limo drivers and guards in back a laugh sometimes. But it pleased her to see how the ostrich feathers floated above her short hair as she walked and the white complimented her dark sienna skin—not espresso or latte like they were always calling black skin in books. She'd matched her arm to color swatches and found out. Maggie knew she was no beauty, except maybe for her eyes, but at the moment she looked years younger than thirty-five. Of course, she hadn't meant to wear this outfit here. Not until she was on the subway, on her way to church, did she remember that she hadn't cleaned Dr. Rossi's lab. While he was gone, she only had to do it on Wednesday, but the week had flown by in a snap.

"Confess," Sam said, following her. "This hat's from London, isn't it?"

Maggie had hoped Sam would be on his break and that she could slip in without the hat being seen by anyone inclined to ask where she'd bought it and why. Ignoring him, she pushed the elevator button, fumbling in her purse for the keys, but feeling triumph. When it came to hats, nothing could outdo a Graham Smith. Maggie read Vogue, so she knew.

He reached down and touched a feather and she glared up at him. If he hadn't had such big shoulders, Sam could have been somebody's stand-in for long shots in a movie. His nose wasn't straight enough for him to be the star and there were faded scars around his neck that looked ragged like they came from brawls. She'd always thought he'd make a perfect Irish wrestler. He wore his dark brown hair clipped and going in all directions like the kids did.

Sam spoke French and Italian. He said he'd learned them in the merchant marine in his youth and Maggie believed him. She'd once overheard him swearing up a storm. He was a "man's man" type who probably swept foolish women off their feet with his rakish smile.

"Sam Duffy, take your phalanges off my hat!" Maggie snapped, proud that she remembered the medical term for fingers. It didn't surprise her to glimpse the outline of a holstered gun under his long coat, given how filthy rich the building's nine tenants were, each occupying an entire

floor—and given how John Lennon died across the park. All in all, Sam was not your ordinary doorman. The tenants liked having him around. Usually she did, too. Not now.

"Pardonne moi, madame," Sam said and swept his hand away. "But it's got to be from England. I've never seen a hat like that anywhere else."

"It's from the selfsame place, Sam, thank you very much. And I don't want to hear none of your jokes. Okay?"

"Me? Joke? Before such a chapeau? Turn around. Let me see it. What are you so dressed up for, anyway?"

Maggie's gaze flew up to the domed chandelier in irritation. Romans 5:2-4, said "tribulation worketh patience and patience, experience; and experience, hope." Sam was helping her learn patience by getting on her nerves. She decided to be firm. "Sam, I don't have no time to play. I'm in a hurry!"

She saw a hurt look flash in his eyes and decided to say a little more. "My church is having an important function today and I've got to be there."

He looked surprised. "Off to church with you, then! Clean tomorrow. It won't matter. The good doctor's not even here and I haven't seen his sister this week. You can't work dressed like that, anyway." He scrutinized her. "Do you know you have runs all up your stockings?"

Maggie humphed, opened her large purse, and half lifted a package of pantyhose.

"I see," he said.

The elevator dinged behind them and she stepped inside the car. "I'm paid to clean the lab on Wednesdays when he's gone, Sam, dressed up or not. Lord willing, Wednesday is when I'm gonna clean." She punched the code for the eighth floor into the elevator keypad.

He shook his head as if she were hopeless.

Maggie exited into the foyer in front of Dr. Rossi's suite. In recesses on either side of his double doors were two intricately patterned blue and yellow vases Dr. Rossi said were antiques from Deruta, Italy. She unlocked the doors and entered. When she flicked a switch, light played on the wide corridor's arched ceiling, gently illuminated paintings, a softwood floor with parquet trim, and a slim Persian carpet. Midway down the corridor in a cubbyhole hung a seventeenth century crucifix made of heavy silver, the most beautiful she'd ever seen. Below and padded in red velvet was the ebony prie dieu on which Dr. Rossi and his sister knelt and prayed. Maggie always felt like she was in a palace, just walking down this hall. She passed rooms on her right and left and, because she thought she'd heard a sound, stopped at the solarium.

"Hello? Anybody here?" she called.

It was the only room where she'd ever heard sounds from the penthouse upstairs, which was occupied by a Mr. Brown.

Not that she was a snoop, of course. She was only curious, like anyone would be if they'd seen what she had over the years when she was downstairs in the basement emptying trash. Maggie had found that if she stepped up on one of the metal equipment housings, she could see through a crack in the

wall between everyone else's garage and his. She'd seen no less than two United States presidents—one current, one an ex—a couple Arabs in their Rolexes and robes, a Supreme Court judge, senators, congressmen, and a Chinese-looking guy, most of them hat-in-hand and grinning, shaking hands goodbye as they got off Mr. Brown's private elevator, got in their limousines, and left his private garage. No fanfare. Nothing in the papers about their ever being here. It didn't seem right to her that important people should always be arriving in secret and one at a time. She'd tried to pump Sam for information, but when it came to the tenants, Sam was a living sphinx.

Maggie entered the solarium and crossed the short hallway created by the greenhouse installed for Miss Rossi's flowers. She'd had rare Moth Orchids shipped in from Asia and they were blooming in long white-to-pink sprays. Maggie passed them and went to the farthest corner of the solarium where the wrought iron furniture was. From there, she could see the penthouse upstairs, or at least a corner of its brick terrace. She took off her hat and pretended she was enjoying the lush, green view of Central Park. Maggie grew excited when she glimpsed the tip of a red hat. Either it was a tall woman, she decided, or one of those big shots in the Catholic Church.

Hearing nothing else, she returned to the hall and went to Dr. Rossi's lab at the end, getting out her key to the metal door.

Inside she took off her hat and placed it on the long table below the full-sized, framed replica of the Shroud of Turin. Dr. Rossi bought it when he was just seventeen and went on a pilgrimage to Rome. Frances said he found the Scala Santa, the twenty-eight steps of Tyrian marble taken from Pontius Pilate's headquarters in Palestine. Jesus must have gone up them on the day he was condemned. Dr. Rossi had ascended them on his knees, like the other faithful, stopping on each one to say its special prayer. He'd brought this copy of the Shroud home with him and told his father he wanted to be a priest, but his father wouldn't hear of it. For days they'd fought while his mother and Frances cried. The father won in the end, but Dr. Rossi had hung this up and lived like a priest his whole life, anyway.

To Maggie it seemed indecent to display Jesus' broken body like that, but she whispered, "Forgive us, Lord," like she always did when she saw it. She took off her white gloves and put on a long-sleeved lab coat. She pulled on medical grade latex gloves, just as a precaution. All she needed was to dust. In his absence, there would be no spills or broken test tubes, no biohazard waste.

Hurriedly, she wiped the familiar black surfaces: the glass-fronted cabinets and stainless steel shelves, the white lab refrigerator, his laminar flow hood, gleaming microscopes of different kinds, his scales and meters and racks of waiting test tubes—everything the latest and the best for his research. She knew most of his equipment because her first job in New York had been at Harlem Hospital. Once he'd had a lab at Mount Sinai but when he was refused space for a controversial project, he up and installed a lab right here. Must have had his lawyer grease palms to get the permits. Must have paid big to run the plumbing and such from his Dad's old medical office up here.

She was dusting the desk when her hand sent a notebook flying. It bounced on the tile floor and clicked as it opened, as if it had been locked. She reached to pick it up and was shocked to see her name entered on what appeared to be a list. Maggie drew the page closer, and then slapped the book shut.

"Look at me, snooping," she said out loud.

The word Journal was printed on the cover. She'd seen the notebook, or others like it, in the lab from

time to time.

Maggie put it down and finished her dusting. Then she looked at her watch, glanced across at her Graham Smith hat, and sat down at the desk.

"Jesus, forgive me for what I'm going to do," she said.

She opened the journal to the page with her name and read the line. It said:

9. Let Maggie go before proceeding.

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