



THE ESSENE HERESY

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Chapter Three

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“If we don’t come up with something to fatten the ratings soon, Channel Four will cancel the damn show. That’s what they’re saying. Not officially, of course - but apparently that was the thrust of their meeting last Thursday.”

Across the room, behind his unkempt desk, the producer seemed more than usually hyper to Danica. Not that she wasn’t used to his histrionics. Most times she found them endearing. After all, producers were paid to worry about ratings, TV politics and where the money came from - all the yucky stuff. But today the young man was more than normally edgy. Almost manic. Maybe it wasn’t just the fate of *Strange Encounters* that was bothering him. Danica decided not to probe into his personal life. She was *only* the show’s presenter after all.

“We’ve got some good stuff coming up,” Danica said. She crossed her tanned legs and patted the red leather of the fake Chesterfield sofa with her fingers. “The Turin Shroud--”

“Dull, boring.” Tom Bentley shook his head and looked skyward. “Yawn-arama.”

“What the about the Templars piece?”

“Gimme a break, Danica. Everybody’s sick of the bloody Templars. That episode sucks, big time.” Danica didn’t agree but thought it best not to interrupt. “Shit, nothing we’ve got in the can is going to change anything. You know it, I know it. We need something *more*.”

Summer rain drizzled against the windows. Outside the fourth floor office of *Quizzical Productions*, the old gray city droned with its usual monotonous roar of activity. Traffic, the occasional whine of a cop car, the hubbub of people moving. Inside, the atmosphere grew more tense.

Danica breathed in. “Well, Tom, I keep saying we need to do more live stuff. Drop the stock footage and let me talk, interview people, make it more interactive...”

“And for once I agree with you,” Tom said, stopping Danica in her tracks. *Things must be bad*, she thought. “We need to make the show seem more *relevant*. Make it punchy. Topical. Looser.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.”

“And?”

Now was her chance. Danica Palmer composed herself, getting ready to make the pitch she’d been practicing in the mirror all weekend.

The door behind her opened and Tom’s gaze was torn from her. Danica cursed under her breath. She looked back and Tom’s secretary hovered in the doorway. Danica gazed at the girl and wondered how old she was. Eighteen, nineteen? Not much younger than herself. The secretary seemed pensive, as though unsure her presence was welcome.

“It’s Harvey. He’s outside.”

“Well send him in then.”

Sure, thought Danica, *don’t mind me*.

Tom Bentley rose. His demeanor softened as he watched his precious award-winning director enter the office. Danica stood, fought the urge to curtsy.

“Harvey, so glad you’re here.” Tom shook Harvey’s hand. Danica knew not to offer her own. As always, the old man seemed nervous of coming near her, let alone touching her hand, as though her youth might somehow infect him. “Our beautiful presenter was about to pitch an idea to me, weren’t you, Danica? Probably a good thing if you’re in on the event.”

Danica bristled. She’d wanted to clear the way with Tom first. Pitching to both of them was going to be tough. Especially when she invariably had the feeling her presence on the project was merely tolerated by these guys, rather than seriously valued - as if the public didn’t think of *Strange Encounters* as *her* show.

Harvey wandered across the room and stood by the window behind Tom’s desk. He leaned against the sill. Tom hovered by his desk, which meant Danica would be lower than both of them if she sat down. A scenario whereby she’d be at a definite psychological disadvantage. *Do men do these things deliberately*, she wondered.

No matter. Get on with it, she told herself.

“We were talking about the show’s ratings, Harvey. And how Channel Four is not happy with them.”

“Really?” A grimace crossed Harvey’s face. Tom looked sheepish, apologetically shrugging to the director. Undeterred, Danica continued.

“We need to make the show more *modern*. I think we need to make the whole thing more in tune with a younger demographic.”

Harvey grunted. “Yes, well, isn’t that something you people do in post? Snappy fonts, quick edits, all that MTV, You-Tubey tripe?”

“Not exactly, Harvey.” She knew that using his name would silence him. She’d have to do that before she shot them the big idea. “We need extra footage.”

“Budget, Danica,” Tom said. “There’s no more money...”

“We won’t need much. I’m talking about studio based chat. We can green screen it if we have to. Cheap as you like. No location stuff. Just me and a few interviewees. Talking, answering questions, putting real people on the spot. That kind of thing. Just to give the show a lift. Make it more... *fun*.”

Harvey shook his head and sighed as though Danica was a sad indictment of how bad things had gotten in this world. He looked to Tom for confirmation. Danica was pleased to note that Tom was absorbed in thought.

My God, he’s considering it.

Tom paced the room, his hand stroking his chin. Danica proceeded.

“Did either of you see the news report about Itamar Leibnitz on Saturday?” The two men didn’t react. “He’s a professor at Harvard University. At least he *was* until he was killed last week. By an unknown assassin, no less.”

“Danica,” Tom said. “What’s this got to do with—”

“Let me finish, Tom. Now the thing with this professor is that he’s been working on The Copper Scroll - from Qumran. Not the famous one, I know we’ve already done that. But the other one.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “What *other* one?”

Danica spoke slowly, more confident now. “If you remember, the Copper Scroll refers to lots of sacred treasure - apparently buried around Qumran, or not, depending on who you believe. But the original copper scroll also refers to *another scroll*. And this other scroll is supposed to document what it calls ‘an explanation’ of the data contained in the original scroll. A few months back the professor was rumored to have found a copy of the second scroll - in some university basement. Now, I know this might be a stretch, but *what if* this professor was killed because of

something he discovered about this new scroll? Maybe the true whereabouts of the buried treasure?"

"And you want to do a story about this?"

"Yes. Like an investigation - to find out the truth."

"This all sounds a bit off the wall to me," Harvey said. "Not really Emmy stuff. Besides which, there's no drama in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It's been done to death. By me as a matter of fact."

"Give her a chance, Harv. There's something in this. We can do a kind of update. Something fresh. Something relevant - in the news. Not what Channel Four would be expecting from us at all. So, Danica, how do you want this to work? You what, you want to interview cops and experts and whatever?"

"No, I want to go one step *further*. Do a kind of treasure hunt. Maybe use a psychic to find the treasure. On a map or something. You know how they go into a trance and then pick a location. X marks the spot - that kind of thing. I think we should open with that and see where it takes us."

Harvey said, "That sounds like the stupidest thing I have ever heard."

"No, no, I like it," Tom gushed. "It's TV, Harv. It's not supposed to be deep." Tom frowned. "But what if we organize this hunt for the treasure and it's not there?"

"Tom, it really doesn't matter if we never find it. The *search* for the treasure is the fun part."

"Yes, I can see it. Yes. This could put the ratings through the roof!"

"All we need to get is a credible psychic – actually, they're called remote viewing specialists by the CIA - "

"We'll put that little factoid in."

"And make sure they have a good on-screen personality. You know, someone young, sexy, in tune with the demographic - and just roll the camera. I'll do it myself if necessary. Get that gritty handheld thing going. Young people love that."

Harvey openly blustered.

Tom said, "Okay, we'll do it. I'll draw up some schedules. Now, all you need to do, Danica, is trawl through the available psychics and find someone we can use, you know, to *locate* the treasure." He grinned, winked at Danica. Harvey shook his head in disgust.

“Actually,” Danica said, smiling. “I *already* have someone in mind.”

More - coming soon. For regular thrilling installments of this story go to:

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