

Opening extract from
**Venice, a Cat
and a Koala**

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Published by
Authorhouse

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In the spring of the new millennium Emma Andrews made the short voyage across the lagoon from historic Venice to its Lido to keep a four o'clock appointment. Forty minutes later she was outside again, with tears in her eyes and clutching a document. There was another copy in a hotel in Venice. As she crossed the road, a car screeched to a halt and the driver lowered his window to foul-mouth her; disorientated, instead of turning right to return to the Lido vaporetto, she walked towards Malamocco. After walking some distance she began to take in her surroundings and the unfamiliarity of the area troubled her, but she continued in the same direction until the destination on the front of an oncoming bus made her realize she was walking the wrong way. When she opened her diary the next morning, she drew a pattern of heavy black squares around the date of that day, forgetting its bright spring sunshine.

Six months before that visit to the Lido, she had been woken as usual by the bells of Santa Maria del Carmelo playing *Ave, Ave, Ave Maria* before the chimes for seven o'clock, and abandoned the safe warmth of sleep for the demands of the day. She had walked briskly to her first pick-up point, enjoying this quieter time of the morning when the tourists were eating breakfast, to a small family-run hotel, da Bergamo. An oblique direction, a haphazard deviation.

She had been asked to arrive early, and on announcing her identity to the receptionist she was shown into an office where the October sunlight was casting its rays through a tall, narrow window. When she was a few steps inside the office, she paused at the sight of a slim dark-haired man gesticulating as he spoke rapidly into the phone. She guessed he was in his early thirties. As he turned to look at her, the light from the window imposed a warm tint on his tense face; still talking on the phone, he smiled at her and pointed to the chair on the side opposite to his desk. She sat down, and looked at the gleaming wood of the well-polished desk, at the dapple of light reflected on to the brass desk lamp, and up at the wall at the side of the desk where there hung a portrait of a woman

in her thirties holding the hand of a small boy, whom Emma recognized as the man now in front of her. "*Mia madre,*" he said as he followed her gaze.

He finished his phone conversation and stared into her eyes. She stared back without blinking, and introduced herself, extending her hand in the businesslike fashion she had learned for her new way of life. "Good morning. I'm Emma Andrews."

She received a quick firm grasp in response. "*Piacere.* I'm Antonio Bergamo. Call me Toni."