
THE
REPROBATION
SERIES BOOKS 1-3
CATHERINE
FEARNS

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.

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CATHERINE FEARNS



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Dedication

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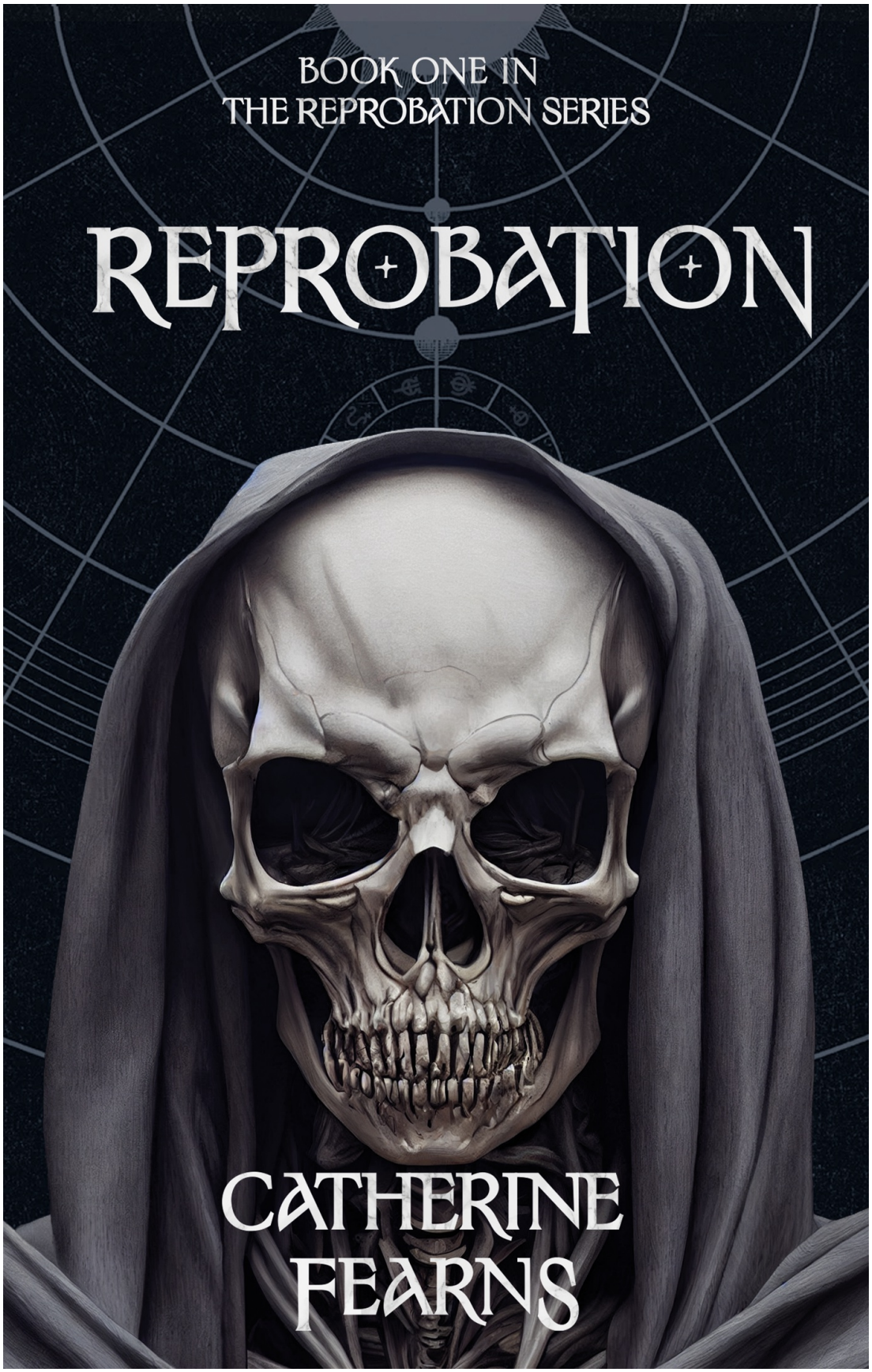
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BOOK ONE IN
THE REPROBATION SERIES
REPROBATION
CATHERINE
FEARNS

CHAPTER ONE

Across grey waters, where the river Mersey meets the Irish Sea, wind turbines puncture the dawn horizon like spinning crucifixes. Beyond, tiny lights frame the ghostly shape of an exploratory oil rig guarding this watery Golgotha. On the beach, the smooth sandscape is perforated by the evenly spaced bronze figures of Antony Gormley's art installation, *Another Place*. So many faceless men, some half submerged, gazing out to sea and waiting calmly, expectantly in this liminal space. To the south is the port of Liverpool, where piles of coloured containers and bright blue gantry cranes pierce the landscape, yearning for a prosperity long lost. And to the north, as the beach recedes into sand dunes and forest and piles of war-rubble, here too is a crucifix.

A cross erected in the sand, fashioned from two pieces of builders' timber, supported by sandbags. The cross supports a man, a hand nailed to each end of the horizontal plane. The naked body in between the hands does not hang forlorn and Christ-like, but instead tied and undignified to the rigid vertical plank. Its skin papery and grey in the early stages of decomposition. His neck fastened in an eternal throttle with ropes at the intersection of the cross, causing the man's face to tilt up towards the words painted neatly on the wood above his head.

'*Hath not the potter power over the clay?*'

At his feet, the tide has left a pile of razor clams and bladder wrack, an offering to the dead. But no crown of thorns for this martyr; instead, across his forehead, a deep carving in which the blood has long dried, leaving the clear dark outline of an image of an inverted axe with a double blade. And no jeering crowds for this condemned man; only scatterings of oystercatchers and sandpipers that beachcomb for treasures, while gulls and starlings soar vulture-like against the wind. Soon the first dog-walkers and joggers of the day will find their morning pilgrimage tainted forever.

* * *

'What happens when we die?'

Dr Helen Hope looked up at her audience. A decent smattering of first and second years ranged on benches that rose to the top of the windowless basement lecture theatre. Nowadays, she always enjoyed this first rhetorical question of the trimester, this easy and rather theatrical provocation. The stage fright and spiritual terror that had crippled her at the beginning of her lectureship had dissipated, and spurred by the popularity of this course she had designed. Since offering Eschatology, there had been a run on applications, both from within and outside of the Theology department.

'What happens when we die?' she repeated, shrugging expectantly. It appeared to be a shy group and no one today was going to play along and venture an answer, so she continued.

'This is surely the central question that all religions and philosophies try to answer, and that's why it must be the central question of any Theology degree. Perhaps you chose this course because you are looking for that answer. Perhaps you just needed another credit and thought it

sounded cool. Perhaps you heard there was a hot nun in a habit who taught it.'

There was a ripple of laughter and she felt the tension in the room lift instantly; this always got them and she had perfected her deadpan reaction. But she still loathed herself for saying it and imagined herself in thirty years' time, still here, with the wording of her joke changed to 'crazy old nun.'

'Perhaps you don't even know what eschatology means, and you're not sure why you are here. Eschatology is the study of death, judgement, and the ultimate destiny of the soul and of humankind. Pretty important, right? Eschatologies vary as to their degree of optimism or pessimism about the future. Each religion, each philosophy, each individual, all have their own interpretation of the hereafter. In this course, we will study eschatological texts in the hope that they will illuminate history, psychology, and what motivates humankind to keep going. You may also use this course as an opportunity to consider your personal belief system.

'And so for your first essay, using the reading list which should be in front of you, I'd like you to consider that simple question. What Happens When We Die? You can be as creative as you like with it really, but make sure you use at least one of the set texts and carefully consider the structure of your essays. Now if anyone needs help with essay planning…'

She stopped when she noticed that someone had put up their hand to ask a question. A man leant back in his seat, legs outstretched, twirling a pen and looking wry. He was older than the rest, perhaps a mature student.

'Yes - please go ahead?' she nodded towards him.

'What do *you* think happens when we die, Dr Hope?'

Ah, there's always one, thought Helen. *The cynic, the wise guy. He's already gone there. And why not - it livens things up.* A hush fell over the room, and those who had been making moves to leave now stopped and took notice.

'That's an excellent question, er… sorry, I don't know your name yet?'

'Paul.'

'Paul. That's a very good question, and I was planning to cover it during our first proper lecture next week, but perhaps I should have introduced myself more fully at the beginning. Now the first thing to say, before I answer, is that none of you should feel obliged to reveal your personal beliefs, either inside this room or in the pub afterwards. That's not what this course is about. But since you asked so nicely,' she smiled and bowed her head, 'I will tell you just briefly about the belief system in which I operate. I am a Calvinist nun. Calvinist, referring to John Calvin, the theologian who played a prominent role in the sixteenth century Reformation. Calvinist Christians, or reformed Christians, believe in Heaven and Hell, of course, but they also believe in-'

'The tulip, right?' the young man interrupted.

'Well, that's right, the TULIP is sometimes known as the five pillars of Calvinism. T for Total Depravity, U for Unconditional Election, L for Limited Atonement, I for Irresistible Grace, P for Perseverance of the Saints.'

As she said this, he was nodding knowingly, which she couldn't help but find irritating. 'We'll have to leave discussion for another time,' she continued, 'but the essential idea is that of predestination; God has already decided who will be saved and who will be damned. Some say it's a cruel doctrine, but it's actually a clear interpretation of the Bible. And it leaves us with the enormous challenge of how to know a god we cannot understand. I suppose I dedicate my life to solving the ultimate paradox of the two divine wills.'

She was losing their attention since the session had run over into lunchtime, so she decided to

wrap things up.

'That question in itself is worthy of multiple PhDs, so I hope it gives you a sense of how broad this course is.' She packed up her own things, indicating that the students could do the same and raising her voice over the commotion. 'As I say, it doesn't have to be Christian or religious at all. Some of you may want to focus on futurism, climate change, or terrorism, for example. I hope you enjoy your first assignment. Please don't worry about anything and email me if you have any questions. Thank you. Oh, and remember, ladies and gentlemen - no Wikipedia. I will know if you cut and paste!'

Students filed out, switching on phones and chatting. Dr Hope made her way out of the lecture theatre, avoiding eye contact with Paul as she went; along corridors and upstairs until she emerged from the university building onto Hope Street. The two cathedrals of Liverpool framed either end of the vista, both these monoliths shrouded in a fine drizzly mist on this grey October day. Closest to her was the modern Catholic cathedral, known affectionately as Paddy's wigwam due to its unique modernist structure. The spiked cylindrical tower splayed down to a truncated conical body supported by flying buttresses, giving it a tent-like appearance. The quirky architectural design and multi-coloured stained glass conferred a scouse character and made this, the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, the 'fun' cathedral. Therefore, despite this Catholic cathedral's unusual look, and the traditional dominance of Catholicism in Liverpool, it was the traditional-looking and austere Anglican cathedral, a lonely brick castle on its plateau opposite, which looked down over the city in judgement.

Today Helen had been lucky and secured a parking space right outside the lecture hall, and as she fumbled with her car keys, she was aware of amused whisperings from a group of students hanging around nearby. It was to be expected; a nun climbing into a bright green Volkswagen Beetle was an odd sight to behold. Helen's religious order made no concessions to modernity with their uniform. Her habit consisted of a floor-length grey tunic, belted at the waist with a traditional rope cincture. Over this was a white scapula and guimpe, while a white coif fitted around her head, ensured that her hair couldn't be seen underneath the black veil crowing everything. A large wooden cross on a long string of wooden beads was her permanent accessory.

Helen started the engine and waved to the students whom she knew were still talking about her, admitting to herself that somewhere deep inside she enjoyed this little notoriety. The ancient Volkswagen was the Order's shared car, known cosily by the Sisters as the 'pootler', a term that had made her cringe once but that now, she noticed with dismay, she was beginning to use herself. Apart from Helen, only one other Sister had a driving license, and so for the most part the car was effectively hers alone.

She drove back towards Formby contented, enjoying the mild exhilaration and relief of having completed this week's public performance. The dock road always provided an evocative drive; the romance of industry, empty warehouses, broken windows, faded signs for businesses and pubs long closed. Liverpool was scattered with abandoned churches; some converted into apartments or climbing walls; others left to rot and crumble with graffiti, weeds growing in cracks, the whispering of angry ghosts. Here and there were businesses still thriving poignantly - a workman's café, a sex shop, and a Chinese supermarket - amongst the wreckage of the past? This was all changing, of course. The regeneration of Liverpool had been underway for ten years, ever since being awarded the European City of Culture in 2008, and now parts of the city centre sparkled with modernity. Container ships and car ferries easing into Liverpool Bay would still see the famous skyline of the Liver birds, the Seventies-style Radio City Tower and the two

cathedrals, but these landmarks now mingled with futuristic skyscrapers, chrome and glass. Meanwhile, the crumbling warehouses along the docks were gradually being transformed into luxury apartments, hotels, and live-work complexes. While she was glad for the city, Helen couldn't help feeling a quixotic wistfulness for the nostalgia of industrial dereliction; the histories that lay behind each broken factory window, each faded shop sign.

She never allowed herself to listen to music, in the car or anywhere else, but today perhaps a little radio news was in order, and she turned on City FM to hear a soft scouse accent announcing the headlines.

'There is a police incident underway today on Crosby beach; reports are of a body being found, the area has been cordoned off for investigation. No further details at this time, but we'll keep you updated.'

Her ears pricked up at the mention of Crosby beach; the Order was only a couple of miles up the coast from there in the Formby pinewoods, and her walks along the dunes took her down to Crosby almost daily. She imagined a drowning, perhaps the mud flats or a rip tide, and shuddered at unnameable ghosts.

Soon docks became suburbs became farmland and autumnal forest, as Helen approached the affluent residential area of Formby. She wound her familiar way down the long driveway of Argarmeols Hall, home of the Order of the Sisters of Grace. Argarmeols Hall comprised a rambling and somewhat crumbling Victorian mansion flanked by a small church, which was in rather better condition. Both hidden from the road and surrounded by forest - the huge sweeping coastal pinewoods of Formby and Freshfields, the last stronghold of the natterjack toad, and protected reserve for England's dwindling population of red squirrels. Fortunate walkers would see them darting up and down the tree trunks.

The Sisters of Grace was the only Calvinist Order, male or female, in the northwest of England, the mansion and adjoining church donated by an eccentric benefactor early in the last century. In a city of kindness, warmth and Catholic forgiveness, Argarmeols Hall stood fast as a fortress of severity, and for the ten years since she had taken the veil, it had been Helen's home, providing the mercilessness that she craved.

The crunch of gravel beneath her tyres was always her familiar welcome, followed by the scent of damp pine as she opened the car door. But today, as she pulled into Argarmeols, the first thing she saw was a police car, and then Sister Mary, waiting anxiously in the doorway. Mary came waddling hurriedly down the steps towards her, picking up her skirts clumsily.

'Sister Helen, there are two detectives here to see you. They want to ask you some questions about a body?' Sister Mary looked nervous, but also a little excited. She lived for the promise of rare moments of drama like these, and Helen often wondered how on earth she could stand to live the life they had chosen.

'We put them in the living room with a cup of tea, but you should go straight in. I think they're in a hurry.'

'OK, thank you, Sister Mary.'

'God bless you, Helen. Let me know how it goes, won't you?'

'I will,' Helen smiled as she went opened the door.

* * *

A young man and woman stood up as she entered the room and reached forward to shake hands.

They didn't look hostile at all, causing Helen to instantly relax. In fact, they looked out of their depth in more ways than one, eyeing their ascetic surroundings uncertainly. He was wearing a somewhat ill-fitting suit, with shoes that appeared to be running trainers. He was tall and handsome in that wiry, scouse fashion, with an earnest frown and deep-set eyes that gleamed with sarcasm. But he rubbed frequently at his designer stubble and gave the impression that he would rather wear the same uniform as his colleague. Over her regulation white shirt and tie, this small and neat young woman wore an intimidating dark blue flak waistcoat, which displayed the Merseyside Police logo, along with its radio, weapon, and other threatening paraphernalia of law enforcement. Her hair conservatively tied back under her policewoman's hat, but she wore full make-up. She and Helen nodded almost imperceptibly at each other in knowing amusement at the incongruity of their respective female uniforms.

The man spoke with a deep Liverpudlian accent.

'Dr Hope?'

'Sister Helen, please,' she smiled. 'I'm only "Doctor" when I'm at the University.'

'Right, Sister. I'm Detective Inspector Darren Swift, and this is Detective Constable Colette Quinn. Nothing to worry about at all, and we'll try not to take up too much of your time. We were just hoping for some guidance from you, really.'

'Guidance? You mean spiritual guidance, detective?' Helen said with an arched eyebrow as they sat down. The detectives looked unamused, and she instantly regretted the moment of uncharacteristic insolence; what on earth was she thinking? Perhaps that student Paul had somehow rattled her today. Detective Inspector Swift continued.

'Unfortunately, a body was found in the early hours of this morning on Crosby beach, up at the north end, so very close to here.'

'Yes, I know.'

'How..?' Both detectives were taken aback, and glanced at each other.

'I heard it on the radio on the way here.'

'Oh, oh right.'

'I didn't hear it from God, if that's what you were wondering.' She smiled. *Back in the game, that one worked*.

But she had set the detectives on edge, and they seemed irritable now. 'So anyway,' said Swift, 'we haven't identified the body yet, and we're checking missing persons, but unfortunately, it is going to be a murder investigation. Whoever did this appears to have covered their tracks very well, and the tide has also been in and out, so we're working with the evidence we have while we wait for forensics to identify the body. It's likely to be drugs-related.'

'Ah, I see.' Helen nodded expectantly as Swift went on.

'The reason we're here is that there was some writing at the crime scene, and it's some sort of religious quote. Obviously, we looked it up, and it's from the Bible, the Book of Romans, it says. Anyway, we just went into the nearest vicarage in Crosby and they sent us here to see you, because apparently you're an expert on religious texts. We're just looking for some context and whether it could give us any clues. It says here,' he read from his notes, 'you're an eschatologist - what does that mean exactly?'

'Yes, I'm a lecturer in the Theology Department at the University, and eschatology is just a course I've been teaching for the past couple of years. It's about death, the end of the world, fun stuff like that. So - what's the quotation?'

'Right, yes. It's…' he read from his notes, '*Hath not the potter power over the clay?'*

With that said, Helen was momentarily lost to the room, drawn into private thoughts, and DC

Quinn leaned forward and coughed to nudge her back into the conversation.

'Do you know it, then?' Quinn asked. 'If you can't remember, we can show you where we looked it up online or there must be plenty of Bibles here.' She gestured to the bookshelves around the room.

'Sorry, yes, sorry.' Helen shook herself back into the conversation. 'Of course I know it. *Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour*? It's from Romans, chapter nine verse twenty-one, if I'm not mistaken. I was just startled because it's so very relevant to our…'

She paused, lost in thought, and the detectives waited restlessly for her to continue.

'It's one of the many passages in the Bible that refers to the concept of divine will, or God's power over the fate of mankind; and in particular, the idea of predestination. That is, God in his wisdom chooses certain individuals who will be saved and certain who will be sinners, condemned to Hell.'

At this, Swift and Quinn both made the same facial expression, mouths turned down at the edges in unwilling acknowledgement of her elucidation.

Swift said, 'Predestination… and that can't be changed? Seems a bit depressing. Why on earth would you choose to believe that?'

Helen smiled benignly. This was the usual reaction to Calvinism. 'It's not so much what we choose to believe. More important than the doctrine itself is the way it causes us to live our lives.'

'And are we supposed to know who these saved and sinners are?'

'Oh no. Can you imagine a world in which we knew? All we can do is our best.'

Swift looked at his watch, then at Quinn, saying, 'We should get back. That crime scene needs to be moved before the next tide comes in.' Then he looked directly at Helen. 'If you don't mind me asking, how does this place stay afloat?'

'Well, we receive grants from English Heritage thanks to the history of the buildings and funds from the United Reformed Church, since we act as an unofficial care home for very old or infirm nuns. One of our Sisters once trained as a doctor, so we have a degree of medical expertise here to take care of them. Then of course, my lecturer salary goes to the Order, plus the Deaconess works as a schoolteacher part-time. Other than that, we need very little, really.'

'Do you get many visitors to the convent? Has anyone unusual come here recently?'

'We do get visitors, yes. Although Calvinism is a very conservative form of Christianity, we try to play some role in the community. There are the public church services on Sundays and Wednesdays. We get a few locals in for that, and then the food bank on Fridays. And we try to be an open door to people in need - we act as a women's refuge, for example.'

'Not really an area of great need around here is it, Formby footballer belt…' mused Swift. 'Anyone taking refuge here at the moment?'

Quinn shifted uncomfortably, visibly bristling at her colleague's harshness, but the nun seemed unoffended.

'No, not at the moment,' Helen replied. 'Of course, we use our country retreat for that anyway, and that's in a secret location for obvious reasons.'

'Well,' said Swift, straightening up to leave, 'it's impossible to tie any of that to a murder motive at this stage, but thank you for your time and we'll come back to you if we find any more… religious clues, let's say. It's either drugs-related, or some nutter, obviously.'

'Or maybe a disgruntled potter,' ventured Helen. They realised she was making a joke, a terrible one, and were unamused. She told herself off again. What was she thinking, making light

of something like this? She could feel herself becoming a bore, long before her time, gradually turning into one of the old dears at thirty-two. A faint spark of something, perhaps desperation, was kindling somewhere within her and beginning to somehow alter her behaviour. Swift was getting up to leave when Quinn touched his arm and whispered.

'What about the marking on the body? It might be linked…'

Swift sighed; irritated she had brought it up but conceding and sitting down again. 'There is something else, as Detective Constable Quinn said out loud; there was a marking on the body. If you're not too squeamish… we can show you on the iPad. This is confidential, of course, not for the press or social media.'

'I'm a nun. I don't know what social media is.' *And now a pointless lie. What am I doing?*

Swift placed the iPad in front of her, and she suddenly recoiled and gasped. They hadn't prepared her, and yet again, she was taken from the room, lost in the private horror of another time she had seen a body.

'*A crucifixion?*'

'No, not exactly. He didn't die like that. Looks like he died a while ago and this elaborate set-up was constructed last night for people to find. Sorry, should have told you more before we showed you the photo. The carving on the body - it's an axe, right? Does it mean anything, religious-wise?'

Again, Sister Helen was very silent and still, and the detectives were about to give up, wishing they hadn't shown her. Then she spoke.

'It's a double-headed axe, and it does have a meaning, yes. Several meanings. Sometimes known as a Labrys, it is originally from Crete and is one of the oldest symbols of Greek civilisation. It was often associated with female deities, a symbol of Greek fascism. But… and the reason I know about this symbol, since it relates to my eschatological study, is that it is also a symbol of death. It symbolises duality in a similar way to the Tau Cross. In Athens, those prisoners sentenced to death had the lower case 't' tattooed on their foreheads and if the prisoner was fortunate to be found innocent, he would have an upper case 'T' in the form of the Tau, which is the symbol of life, tattooed on their forehead.'

'Symbol of death, OK.' Swift tried again to leave, but Helen wasn't finished.

'But detective, this axe is inverted, which means something else again. An inverted axe means anti-justice or rebellion. Rebelling against God. The work of Satan. So I suppose what the writing and the symbol are saying together is that this person has rebelled against God and is going to hell… no matter what. Of course, that is horrible and unknowable. How terribly sad for his family. Who was he? He looks very young…'

But Swift had stood up and moved towards the door. 'We're not releasing any more details at this stage. Once the body is identified and the family notified, you'll no doubt hear about it in the local press.'

* * *

Helen saw them out and watched from the doorway as they made their way across the gravel to the police car. Once they were out of her earshot, Quinn looked at Swift across the car doors. They had only known each other for a few hours, and she was still trying to get the measure of this mysterious detective who had been sent over from the Murder Squad in the city centre. According to the lads back at Crosby station, he was some career-ladder hotshot, but Quinn was

beginning to wonder whether his brooding manner might, in fact, be shyness.

‘You seemed on edge in there, like you couldn’t wait to get out.’ she said. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘I was thinking we should get back to identifying bodies and looking for witnesses, not messing about with nuns and riddles like it’s *The Da Vinci Code*.’

‘What a place, though. Like it’s been frozen in time. And those old nuns who opened the door were so cute.’ She decided to test the waters for banter. ‘I was a convent school girl myself, d’you reckon it did me any harm?’

‘Debatable.’ he said as they drove away. ‘Religion, and me, we have a history, and not a good one. Anyway, this is Liverpool; football is our religion, and Anfield is our church.’

‘Goodison Park, you mean.’

‘Oh, don’t tell me you’re a fucking blue.’

‘Does that mean we’re incompatible, then?’

Quinn smiled sidelong at him, but Swift didn’t take the bait.

‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘what sort of young, nice-looking girl becomes a nun? It’s attention seeking if you ask me. Dead weird.’

‘Ah, that was it. You fancied her.’

‘Fuck off.’

Insults traded. They relaxed into their working relationship, and Quinn had a good feeling about it.

‘Coincidence, wasn’t it?’ she said as they pulled onto the bypass that headed back towards the city. ‘That quotation being so… Calvinist or whatever.’

‘The quote, the axe, the crucifixion - that entire crime scene was a message, a warning. There are plenty of local drug-lords with mansions around here. It has to be gang-related somehow. Detective school 101 - there are no coincidences.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I don’t know. I’m just messing. To be perfectly honest with you, Colette, this is my first case on the Murder Squad. I started last week, passed me exams and switched from Vice. I was only sent down the beach this morning because I live the nearest. Trust me to get a weird one for my first case, eh?’

‘A horrible one as well. Where d’you live?’

‘Waterloo. By the docks, right at the other end of the beach. Just moved there. Anyway, they haven’t taken the case off me yet, but it’s only been a few hours.’

‘It was only by chance I was the Duty Officer this morning. We get the odd body in Crosby, but it’s usually a domestic. You’ll be sound, boss. With me behind you, what could go wrong, eh?’

‘Nice one. Let’s check in with the CSIs on the beach, then head back to Crosby to set up an Incident Room and put the team together.’

‘They’re a good bunch in Crosby, rowdy like, but they’ll get stuck in to this. A lot of them seemed to know you.’

‘Yeah, I grew up there; in fact, I started at Crosby station ten years ago. It’s good to be back.’

‘Not one of the lads anymore though, are you?’

* * *

Helen was still standing on the doorstep, lost in a reverie, when the Deaconess came up behind her quietly, startling her. The Deaconess always stood a little too close, and Helen could smell her sophisticated scent, which was possibly Chanel, one of her few indulgences being not to wash with the rough, pungent carbolic soap that the other Sisters used.

'Everything alright, Helen? We haven't had police here since the time Sister Josephine bought those marijuana plants by mistake. What have you been up to, you naughty girl?'

'Yes, yes, Margaret, everything's fine. Very odd, though. Terrible, really. They found a body on Crosby beach.' For some reason Helen didn't feel like sharing the detail about the crucifix. 'There was a religious quotation with the body, and they wanted someone to explain it. Turned out it was rather Calvinist, actually.'

'Ah, then they came to the best person to analyse it, of course. Our very own little scholar. You know,' she straightened Helen's veil as she spoke; 'I rather miss those chats we used to have. You've been so busy with all that university work. We're very proud of you, of course. But we miss you. Why don't you come and see me later in my room? We could have a glass of wine together after dinner.'

The Deaconess turned Helen around by her shoulders and looked into her eyes, in a way that Helen had used to find so powerful, but now she found slightly patronising. Deaconess Margaret Mills was statuesque in middle age, still the second youngest in the Order after Helen, and she ruled her little dictatorship with a benevolence constantly tinged with threat. The moment was interrupted by Sister Mary eagerly shuffling down the corridor.

'Come on now, Helen, there's time before chapel. Tell us everything!' Margaret released Helen, who linked arms with Mary and was bustled away.

* * *

That evening after dinner and prayers, Helen sat at her desk in pyjamas and dressing gown, to mark the latest batch of essays and prepare for next week's tutorials. However, she was unable to concentrate, so shaken by the day's events, and her Spartan little room provided no comfort or distraction, so she decided to go and work in the convent's library. She crept along the Hall's silent corridor and down the main staircase without really knowing why she was creeping, since there was nothing forbidden or surreptitious about leaving her room at night. But there was an unofficial curfew at the convent in the evenings, the mostly elderly women tired after the rigours of the day's prayer schedule.

Alone under the lamplight and surrounded by books, Helen felt cocooned, and she decided to use the convent's one computer to look up the local news website and see if there had been any developments. There was a video clip with Detective Inspector Swift giving a statement from Crosby beach. He was standing on the sand with the bronze figures of 'Another Place' ranged out behind him into the grey water. The wind had whipped up, sending whistling spindrift along the sand and causing his anorak to flap.

'The body of an unidentified man was found here in the early hours of this morning. We are currently looking through missing persons and asking for any witnesses to come forward.'

The reporter from behind the camera asked, 'Can you confirm reports that the body was hung up on a cross?'

'At this time, we cannot divulge any more details about the crime scene. But I can confirm that we are treating this as a murder investigation.'

Helen clicked on a couple of other news stories and then, absent-mindedly and absurdly looking over her shoulder before she did it, typed ‘double-headed axe’ into the search engine.

There was the Wikipedia entry detailing the Cretan axe, which she had explained, almost word for word, to the detectives. Below it were listings for computer games, fancy dress websites, and historical blogs. She clicked on the ‘Images’ tab; so thrown had she been by the image on the body, she had an urge to see more of these axes. As she scrolled through, one picture caught her eye, since not only was it inverted, but also it looked exactly the same design as the axe on the body.

She clicked on it and was suddenly confronted with a double-headed axe flashing on a black screen, plus an infernal guitar noise blasting through the computer’s speakers. She quickly turned down the volume and, again looking over her shoulder, clicked on the flashing axe that implored her to enter. She found herself on the website of some sort of rock band; five bearded men stood in a forest staring at her, almost comical in the intensity of their expressions. She smiled to herself. She had heard of these heavy metal bands that use religious or satanic imagery for shock value, and she felt it was all harmless enough. Two things kept her on the webpage. First, the band’s name was Total Depravity, an inherently Calvinist notion of sin affecting all parts of man. A flashing button implored her to buy their new album, which was called *Irresistible Grace* - another one of the five pillars of the Tulip. Irresistible Grace. W*hatever God decrees to happen will inevitably happen, and those whom He elects for salvation will inevitably be saved*.

Helen clicked on the band’s ‘Bio’ tab and established that they were a Norwegian group who were apparently ‘melodic death metal masters.’ Whatever that was, she thought it sounded rather beautiful. They were in the middle of a European tour and had already played a concert in Liverpool; just the other night, in fact, and tomorrow they would be in Manchester. *They are here*. A nameless fear, tinged with excitement, stirred in the pit of her stomach.

The lead vocalist and guitarist composed the music and lyrics, named Mikko Kristensen, and who claimed to ‘rail against the tyranny of religion and the lies of belief. If you worship God, you also worship Satan!’ However, for someone who professed to hate religion, he seemed to be obsessed with exploring its ideas. When Helen clicked on the band’s ‘Discography’ tab, she saw immediately that this Kristensen had a deep interest in Calvinist notions. One album, which advertised itself as a ‘concept album’, was entitled *Satan’s Progress* and appeared to be a version of John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, except with the protagonist aiming to get to Hell. There were plenty of other satanic references, too; another album was called *Demoness*, with each song title the name of a female demon: Lilith, Succubus, Empusa, Lamia, and Hantu Kopek.

The record covers abounded with religious imagery, but the overriding theme was always that of a dark figure holding a double-headed axe in front of a wrought-iron gate. She looked up some of the lyrics, which were peppered with expletives and sexual references, but also with quotations from the Bible, from St. Augustine, even from the Canons of Dort. This person had done a lot of theological research, focusing particularly on Calvinist doctrine. *How fascinating*, she thought. *Why is God drawing me towards this?* Today there had been too many signs and wonders, and she was overwhelmed. It was long past midnight now, so Helen shut down the web browser and, without really knowing why, she cleared her browser history before turning off the computer and the lights and going back to bed.

She was still unable to settle, the images of the day flashing past her closed eyelids like an old movie projector; a crucifix, a symbol carved in blood, that expression of unimaginable horror and sadness on the corpse’s face, despite his closed eyes. The detectives and their odd manner the Deaconess at her shoulder, touching her arm; the band members staring out at her with their

heavily charcoaled eyes that attempted to bore into her soul. And then other images, the ones for which her whole life was a penance.

This would be one of those nights, she knew, when sleep would not come. She had learned to accept it. It was always this time of the month, when she was never quite dry down below, and she would writhe and yearn and her hands would slip down towards her thighs. But she would stop herself; her fingers gripping the sheets and she would pray and wait in patient frustration for the dawn light.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, Crosby police station was alive with the buzz of hushed urgency as Detective Inspector Darren Swift came striding in, take-away coffee, bacon sandwich, and files in hand. Things were moving, and he had a new sense of purpose; perhaps he wasn't going to screw up his first murder investigation after all. DC Colette Quinn followed him through the desks to the front of the room with her facial expression steeled against the inevitable jocular whispers of 'Go 'ed Colette!' She stood next to Darren as he faced his new handful of staff, mustering as much confident authority as he could.

'Right, can I have everyone's attention, please? Lads? Right, as you know, we have a category B homicide on Crosby beach. Merseyside Police want to keep things in the area for now, so the murder investigation is going to happen from here. You can basically treat this whole station as the incident room.' There were murmurs and mutterings and a few arms raised, but he put his hands up to quell any questions and continued.

'I'll be the Senior Investigative Officer on this case. For those of you who don't know me, my name is DI Darren Swift; I grew up in Crosby and started off at this station ten years ago, so I recognise a few faces.' He nodded and smiled awkwardly as a few hands waved at him. 'Alright Dazza. Nice to have you back, Swifty.'

'I was down at the Met for a while, and more recently on Vice at Canning Place. DC Quinn here will be my deputy-'

At this, there were more murmurings of 'Wahey, nice one, Colette.'

'…and we'll continue assigning tasks at the end of this meeting, but thanks everyone for a great start.' The general atmosphere of support inwardly buoyed Swift, but behind the banter, he knew everyone felt the seriousness of the situation.

'Lads, this is a murder, bit of respect, OK. We've already made significant progress - Quinn, do you want to fill everyone in on what we know?'

Colette cleared her throat and stepped forward. It was bizarre to hear her own voice speaking out to her peers.

'Right, Forensics and Path were on fire yesterday, so this is what we've got already. Missing Persons brought up a probable ID on the body, which was formally identified last night. The victim's name is Jason Hardman, aged twenty, and lived with his mum and brother in Seaforth. Aged seventeen, he spent a year at Tomlinson Young Offenders Institution for drugs offences, but has been in the clear since and worked as a barman at Zeus. That's the gay club on Seel Street for those of you who don't know. He was reported missing by his family a month ago, and was last seen at work the same day.'

'Anything on social media?' someone asked.

'He had an open Facebook page, but he wasn't very active on it and last posted over a month ago, nothing significant so far. Mobile phone records and other social media will be the next stage.'

'Do we have a cause of death?'

'We do. Cause of death strangulation with no sign of struggle, so it's consistent with him

being sedated in some way, although we're still waiting on the toxicology results. There are…' - and here she read carefully from the pathology report - 'significant needle marks on both arms, which do not look consistent with drug use but with medical treatment, since they were carefully rather than crudely done. The carving of an upside down axe on the forehead was done with a sharp instrument.' As Quinn said this, Swift was putting up photos of the body, and as the team took in the gruesome sight, there were audible shudders and a noticeable darkening of the mood. Swift could feel that Quinn was tiring of her public performance, so he stepped in to help her out.

'Unfortunately, the tide came in between the body being placed and discovered, which has wiped any decent traces of footprints or tyre tracks, and presumably this was intentional. One priority is to figure out how they got the body there. In theory, a car could have driven down the ramp and onto the beach, but it's also feasible that someone strong could have dragged the cross down there from the car park. No fingerprints have been found yet. Whoever it was, were very careful indeed. Right… so there's a lot to go on. Questions? Thoughts? Theories?'

'Could one person have put up that cross, though?' someone asked.

'That's a really good question. Unlikely. It points to a team effort, and likely, a male, due to the height involved. We'd need to do a reconstruction at some point, but we can't do that without making a huge show of ourselves. We need to be careful. Actually, that's another point.' As new parameters came exploding to hit him, Swift felt he was making this up as he went along, and hoped that was not coming across too clearly to his team.

'Community and media liaison - Tracey that's you - this needs to be handled really carefully. The CSIs had the site covered by sheeting quickly, but those dog-walkers that discovered the body - you should assume they are going to talk to the *Crosby Herald*, even the *Echo*, may have done so already. So get on to the papers and tell them not to report any details of the crime scene. Then I need you down at the site with the uniforms to answer questions from passers-by.'

'Question… are we not closing the beach?'

'No, that's the worst thing we could do. Keep it on the down low, I've been told. Another Place is a big tourist attraction, it's a weird crime, there's no need to panic people.'

'Maybe a stupid question, but why are we not releasing details of… the crucifixion?'

'Same reason - to avoid panic, because whoever put the body there was showing off. Why did they want it revealed? Warnings like that are almost always drug-related, so let's get on to Titan and see if they know about anything going down in Crosby.'

A hand went up, and Swift pointed in its direction. 'Yes. Dave isn't it?'

'What's Titan?'

'North West Organised Crime Unit. Jesus, how long have you been here?'

'Two weeks.'

'Oh, right. Fair enough. Baptism of fire, eh?' *For both of us*, thought Darren.

'What about the quotation and the carving?' someone asked.

'Could be gang-related, and again, Titan might help. We're going to look into visitors to that Calvinist convent in Formby, because apparently,' here he shrugged, looking unconvinced, 'the Biblical quotation had something to do with Calvinism or whatever. I think it's tangential; I wonder if the locality of the convent may have inspired the killer to use religion to throw us off the scent. Let's focus on facts - all this religious stuff is only relevant if it relates to forensic evidence and motive. Those timber planks for the cross didn't fit in a car. Dave, see if you can find any vans in the area that night. The nearest CCTV will have been at Hall Road Station - let's hope whoever it was drove that way. And then let's contact timber yards. There aren't that many.'

Swift could feel himself becoming vague; it was time to wrap up the meeting and start focusing on the next steps.

'Right, Quinn and I are heading over to Seaforth to search Jason Hardman's house and interview friends and neighbours. HOLMES team carry on, Door-to-Door carry on, and could the rest of you get onto Tinder, or Grindr, or whatever it is, and find out if Jason met anyone recently?'

Swift sighed inwardly as this was met with a barrage of jokes and banter.

'Eeyarh, put Dave on that. He's already got a Grindr account…'

'He's their best customer!'

'Boss?' Dave put up his hand. 'How do we do that?'

'Right, you need to contact Merseyside Police head office and find out who their SPoC is.'

'You what?'

'Single Point of Contact with the CSPs.'

'You what?'

'Communication Service Providers. For fuck's sake. Don't let me down, people.'

Swift was out of his depth like one of the bronze men on the beach, the tide rising to engulf him. But unlike the figures on the beach that stood firm and implacable, he felt an ominous sense of panic. *The blind leading the blind*, he thought. *Come on, you can do this.*

* * *

Jason Hardman's family home was a redbrick terraced house on Curran Street in Seaforth, the vein through which Liverpool's working-class lifeblood had flowed since the eighteenth century. Each of these streets seemed to point towards the docks, where the ghosts of prosperity stalked on blue metal legs. Curran Street ended at the roaring flyover, beyond which the tanks of Seaforth Cornmills, piles of rusty Maersk and Hainan shipping containers and giant yellow gantry cranes crowded the horizon. It was a street where every house looked the same, two windows and a door, and occasionally a shared alleyway. Each dwelling was given character by the level of pride put into the frontispieces and tiny gardens. Some were drug dens, with piles of rubble outside, boarded windows, graffiti. Others were scruffy student houses, wheelie bins overflowing, bicycles optimistically chained to the railings. This one was immaculately kept, a miniature citadel of fierce pride amid dilapidation. In the cramped front room dominated by a faux leather sofa suite and a flat screen TV, every surface was littered with family photos: holy communions, weddings, holidays, and nights out - artefacts of love. Mrs Hardman sat comforted by her other son. Swift and Quinn sat on matching armchairs either side of the fireplace, awkwardly clutching cups of tea. Everything was infused with nicotine, and Mrs Hardman's hand shook as she balanced her cigarette over the ashtray. Above the electric fireplace hung a wooden crucifix, which nobody had yet thought to take down.

Swift began. 'Mrs Hardman, I know this is a terrible time for you, but we need to find who did this as quickly as possible. Did your son have any enemies? Anyone to whom he owed money?'

'No, no, nothing. I mean, I know he got up to some hi-jinks in the past. He was no angel, but he was just a lovely, lovely lad. Especially since he got out of Tomlinson. That place was great for him. He had his whole life ahead, he was saving to go to university…' She broke down and was silently comforted by her son.

‘Jason was at Tomlinson Detention Centre for a spell two years ago; did he keep in touch with anyone from there?’

‘None of the inmates, no. He wasn’t friends with any of them. He really wanted a fresh start when he got out. Absolutely no drugs at all, I’m sure of it.’

‘There was that teacher, though,’ ventured her son.

Mrs Hardman nodded. ‘That’s right, yeah.’

‘Teacher?’

‘He started taking A-levels in there and he really enjoyed the science, you know, he was very taken with the teacher. He wasn’t in there long enough to sit the exam, so they kept in touch afterwards. He used to go over for lessons and then he took A-level Biology. Got a B as well.’

‘Go over? To the detention centre?’

‘No, to the teacher’s place.’

‘Do you know where that was?’

‘No. He was an adult; we didn’t keep tabs on him.’

‘Did your son have a boyfriend, Mrs Hardman?’

‘Not that we knew of. Nobody who came over, but he kept his personal life to himself, really. Working in a nightclub, his hours were, you know, irregular, and he was often out all night.’

Colette’s eyes wandered to the mantelpiece above the fireplace. ‘That’s him in the Communion photo, isn’t it? He was so handsome. Was he religious himself, Mrs Hardman?’

Mrs Hardman looked at them, stirred suddenly, and she and her son released each other from their comforting clutch. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Well, because of the nature of the crime scene…’

‘He had started talking about it. A bit. About Heaven and Hell. About how he needed to change. He wouldn’t go into it, but we just couldn’t imagine… He’s always been so happy with himself, and so were we - weren’t we?’ She broke down in tears.

‘Did he go to a church?’ asked Swift. Mrs Hardman just shook her head, buried in her son’s embrace.

‘I think me mum’s had enough for today,’ he implored.

Swift wished he was better at this; expressing sympathy didn’t come naturally to him, and he was relieved that the newly appointed Family Liaison Officer would soon arrive. He and Quinn left the family to their grief and went to look around Jason’s bedroom upstairs with gloved hands. The room still smelled of his aftershave. There was no laptop or phone to be found. Other than the usual young man’s paraphernalia - toiletries, dance music magazines, clothes - only two items stood out. On his bedside table, in pride of place, was a navy leather book, embossed in gold with the words ‘Holy Bible.’ The book was hard-backed but clearly well thumbed. And in the drawer of this bedside table, amongst packets of paracetamol and Lemsip, keys and nightclub flyers, was a packet of Dexamethasone.

‘Dexamethasone?’ said Swift. ‘That’s a steroid, right? Bag that up.’

* * *

‘All of us are sinners. All people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good. Inclined to evil! Dead in their sins! *Slaves* to sin! Without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit, they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to expose themselves to such reform. I say again, All of Us Are

Sinners!’

This last sentence was said with such venom and volume that several members of the congregation, who were sitting in the front pews, visibly recoiled. Deaconess Margaret Mills always began her Wednesday evening sermons from the pulpit in a gentle voice tinged with a hint of menace. She would build gradually, moving from the pulpit to the floor, a crescendo of portentous threats as her whole body would come into play. She was a natural performer, with eyes widening and narrowing at just the right moments, catching individuals so that they wanted to look away in shame but couldn’t. Her voice would range from ominous low to shrieking high, the gentle Northern accent sounding impossibly grand in this part of the world. There was no comfort to be had from her sermons, only the fear of God struck into one’s heart, and this was the appeal. For the residents, for the visitors, for Helen. Most of the congregation loved the firebrand thrill of the performance, the horror-film quality of the fear. For Helen, the fear was genuine, visceral. She craved this punishment, this constant, caustic reminder of her sin. After some more fire and brimstone, the Deaconess softened and brought kindness, a sweet manipulation for her audience.

‘Yes, all of us are sinners. And nothing brings the beauty of Jesus Christ to sinful people, believers and unbelievers alike, as powerful as God’s own Scriptures. The Scriptures are the basis of our teaching, of our Gospel, for the word of God is the only word. And we do not question the word of God. From this comes our happiness.’

She smiled for a moment, then suddenly, spectacularly, turned up the anger again.

‘And to those who complain about this grace of an undeserved election and about the severity of a just reprobation, we reply with the words of the apostle.

Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?’

Her eyes were wild now and ranged from one person to the next in fury. St. Michael’s Church was small, more of a chapel than a church, having been built originally to serve only the Argarmeols family and their employees. There was no division between the nave and the chancery, and no room for aisles flanking the nave at its edges. Therefore, there was no escaping the Deaconess’s wrath as she stalked the pews, allowing herself to be an eager vessel for the bitter rage of the Calvinist God. The majesty of this church interior lay in its exaggerated height; in typical Victorian Gothic style, it had been built to aspire to the sky, drawing the eye upwards and reminding the worshipper how very far above him his God was to be found.

‘God’s plan cannot be changed; God’s promise cannot fail; the calling according to God’s purpose cannot be revoked!’

She sighed with theatrical exhaustion, closing her eyes and raising her hands in supplication before wringing them and returning to the pulpit. She was disappointed with her flock, this rabble of hopeless candidates for Heaven. From one face to the next, she looked expectant. The Deaconess taught religious education part-time in a local private school, and Helen, sitting in her usual position on the front pew, sometimes amused herself at the thought of the terror she must instil in those teenagers.

‘May God’s son, Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God and gives gifts to humanity, sanctify us in the truth, lead to the truth those who err; silence the mouths of those who lay false accusations against sound teaching, and equip faithful ministers of God’s Word with a spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all they say may be to the glory of God and the building up of their hearers. Amen.’

At the end of the service, Helen waited as the small congregation filed out in a silent purge, wrapping their coats against the cold autumn evening, all lost in contemplation of their utter

insignificance in the universe. When the church was empty, Helen approached Margaret, who was collecting her papers together at the altar.

‘Deaconess?’

Margaret spun around. ‘Yes, tell me.’

‘Would it be OK if I took the car overnight tonight?’

Margaret’s eyes and body language betrayed a momentary flicker of disappointment - she had been hoping Helen might ask something else.

‘I thought I might go and see my mother.’

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea, Helen? You’ve tried very hard, but it only seems to upset you every time. Has something happened?’

‘No, no, I… just think it’s important to keep showing I’m there for her, you know.’

‘Of course.’ There were those hands on Helen’s shoulders again. ‘Drive safely and come and see me tomorrow when you return. Let me know how it went.’

‘I will, Margaret, thank you. And may I take some money from the kitty? I think we need petrol.’