

Tears of the Falcon

It's bloody murder in Lancashire! - Book 2

JD Benn

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ISBN: 9798374785647

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For Yvonne, the love of my life

*If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;*

Extract from 'If' by Rudyard Kipling

PROLOGUE

Rossall Beach

Alan Geddes loved the stillness of the early morning, especially at this time of year. Rising just after 5am, and careful not to waken his wife of over 40 years, he'd made short work of tea and toast before setting off on his old bicycle. It was a clear morning with the promise of another fine day ahead and, with the benefit of virtually no traffic about at that time, it took him less than ten minutes to reach the seafront midway between Cleveleys and Fleetwood.

Initially staying on the upper level of the promenade, which was also empty apart from a solitary early morning dog-walker, it took a similar length of time for him to cycle as far as the Coastwatch tower that backed on to the golf course. The mounds of sand and stone deposited by the recent high tides hadn't yet been cleared from the rough concrete steps that ran down to the beach, so he dismounted before carefully wheeling his bicycle down and then out over the soft sands. He was careful to avoid an area at the top of the beach where ringed plovers had decided to nest earlier in the season but was less concerned about disturbing the gulls and a regiment of oystercatchers feeding at the edge of the outgoing tide. He walked and waded his way across the shallow channels, circling around the growing beds of sabellaria, heading towards the patch of rocky ground that he knew would soon be uncovered. Reaching his destination, or at least the nearest patch of dry sand, Alan laid his bicycle down then carried a pair of bright yellow plastic buckets the last twenty yards to the spot where the purpose of his visit would soon appear.

Since his retirement from a lifetime of office work, Alan had been in the habit of setting nightlines whenever there was a convenient tide, an activity that he'd learned when accompanying his grandfather almost sixty years earlier. It wasn't so much for the fish, in fact on the rare

occasions that he'd had a decent catch he usually gave most of it away, it was simply a way of occupying his time in a place where he'd always felt most at peace. On days when the tides were right he would go out onto the beach, either in an evening or an early morning, about an hour or so before low water, alone and with only the sound of the wind, the waves and the ever present birds for company. He would look around for the tell-tale signs of worm casts and then quickly dig the thick lugworm from their 'U' shaped burrows under the sand, gathering just enough bait for his own use. Following a familiar routine, his next task was to string the main line between two posts that he'd hammered into the sand, attach his freshly baited hook-lengths, only twelve - nothing too greedy, and then wait until the tide had turned and the whole assembly had been covered by the incoming waves. Depending on the height of the tide he would return around ten hours later, aiming to arrive about fifteen minutes before his line was uncovered, to claim his catch before the gulls could beat him to it.

This particular morning he was hoping for a sea-bass or two on the line he'd set the previous evening. A chap he occasionally chatted to on his weekly visit to the pub had told him that the local boat club had landed several good fish the previous weekend. Or maybe a nice plaice, always his wife's favourite, but they were nothing like as common as they had been. To be honest, he didn't really mind what he caught so long as it wasn't just dogfish and flounders, both of which he always threw back. Fortunately, the weather had recently calmed after a couple of days of strong winds, and he knew that the waves would have stirred up the shallow, sandy seabed, so there should be plenty of fish moving in to feed. Although he'd set lines many times over the years, the usual sense of anticipation kicked in when the bright orange float marking the front end of his line popped into view. After a further ten minutes, and with the water now only halfway up his wellington boots, he removed a large plump dab from the first of his hooks. With the tide receding quickly Alan caught sight of something bulky further down the channel, maybe ten yards beyond the end of his line. Although not yet

fully uncovered he thought it was most likely a discarded sack or a bin bag snagged on the rocks, he just hoped that it wasn't another dead harbour porpoise, two of which had been found on the beach a month earlier.

Back to the job in hand, he set about checking and unclipping the rest of his hooks. Another dab joined the one already in the bucket, but his attention was now focused on a cracking sea-bass of at least two and a half pounds. The fish was still quite lively, and it took a moment or two before he was able to grasp it firmly enough, avoiding the sharp gill plates and spiny dorsal fin, to dispatch it with a sharp blow from the short metal bar, the priest, he carried for that purpose.

By the time he turned back to unclip his final hook length, the depth of water further along the channel had dropped to little more than twelve inches. At first Alan struggled to make sense of what he was seeing, whatever it was now only partially obscured by the shallow waves that were lapping around it. The sudden realisation that it wasn't a sack tethered to the foreshore caused Alan's stomach to heave and he vomited his meagre breakfast onto the rock-strewn sand. It wasn't a porpoise either, not unless it was one with two arms, two legs and what had once been a face, a nightmare of ragged washed-out flesh.

CHAPTER ONE

“Well, bugger me!” Detective Inspector Joseph Penswick carefully replaced the handset of an ancient desk phone before addressing the two women who made up his small team. “That was the Chief Super. She said that we’re to take over the Rossall Beach case from West Division.”

“Really? Is that the body they found on the beach yesterday?” asked the tall, slim, dark haired young woman, who no-one given ten guesses would ever have suspected was a police officer.

“That’s the one Cathy. She also said that the Boss is going to be Senior Investigating Officer on the case, she’ll be joining us later this morning.”

“Yaaay!” A joint cheer went up from Detective Sergeant Catherine Bell and Detective Constable Autumn Jackson.

“Don’t take this the wrong way Boss but it will be good to have the Boss back.... Boss....? This isn’t going to work, is it? Cathy laughed. “How do you feel about being ‘Guv’ or ‘DI Joe’ instead?”

“Just Joe will be fine thank you lass.” The big man smiled, every bit as pleased as the others at the prospect of working with the DCI again, someone they’d all become close to on a long-running case. “Autumn, will you do the honours with the brews please, we need to get up to speed before she gets here. Don’t want her thinking we’ve just been sat here with our feet up.”

There were still aspects of the Fair Snape case, an investigation the team had worked together on for almost three years, that had not been, and never would be, officially closed. Unofficially, and known to only a very small number of people, the case had been brought to a final, and in many ways fitting, conclusion. Rather than being disbanded, the team had been allocated different responsibilities which was why Detective Chief Inspector Yvie Gray, was now working closely with Chief Superintendent ‘Iron Annie’ Atkinson on cases associated with

what she called her ‘special remit’ within the Lancashire Constabulary. The fact that no-one apart from Iron Annie herself seemed to be quite sure what that actually meant was another issue entirely. Joe, Cathy and Autumn had stayed together as an independent investigative unit, also working directly for the Chief Super but, for reasons that they had yet to understand, were still based at the old police station in Clitheroe. For the last three months they had been tasked with reviewing a number of linked murder cases committed over the past three and a half years. The so called ‘executions’ of people deemed to have committed crimes against the environment of such magnitude that they had forfeited their right to life, had all been claimed by a single group who called themselves HMycelium. The cases were still being actively investigated by other officers but there had been no significant progress to speak of in almost six months, hence Iron Annie’s decision to initiate the review by her own people.

Within a couple of minutes, armed with fresh cups of Earl Grey for Cathy and Autumn, and a pint mug of treacle-like builders’ tea for Joe, they gathered at what passed for a conference table in the office they shared. Joe began the briefing by handing round a packet of shortbread biscuits produced from the pocket of an ancient Barbour jacket and made a final check on his laptop, just in case any of the promised information had come through from their colleagues over on the Fylde coast.

“We don’t have a lot to go on just yet but, from what the Chief Super said, and what’s already come through from Fleetwood, we know that the body of a man was found early yesterday morning about quarter of a mile out from the Rossall Point Observation Tower.”

“Is that the building on the prom that looks like it’s about to fall over?” Autumn asked.

“Yes, that’s the one. Whenever we visit Val’s parents it always makes my eyes go funny if we walk past it with the dogs. The body was found by a chap who’d gone out to check on a fishing line that he’d set the evening before. He’s adamant that there was nothing there at low

water and, as he says that he waited around until his lines were covered by the incoming tide, we can be fairly sure that the body must have been dumped, probably by boat, sometime between 8pm and 5am.”

“Are we sure that it’s not an accidental drowning? Wouldn’t be the first time people have been caught out on that stretch.” Cathy asked. She had friends who lived a couple of miles further down the coast at Bispham and they were often scathing about some of the antics that holidaymakers got up to, despite a plethora of warning notices.

“Yeah, we’re sure. His arms and legs were bound with wire which was also attached to a bucketful of concrete. We don’t know yet if he was alive or dead when he was put into the water, but whoever did it wanted to be sure that he’d be found.”

“What reason could someone have for wanting him found, especially so quickly? I mean surely that just increases the chances of them being caught?” Autumn asked. “It would have been easy to take the boat a little further out and he wouldn’t have been uncovered by the tide, he might never have been found.”

“I don’t know lass, but they’ve gone to a lot of trouble so the reason must have been important to whoever killed him. Fleetwood provided the first response and they’ve already sent through photos of the scene. Be warned, they aren’t pretty! Because of the tide the body had to be recovered fairly swiftly and, having spent hours under water being buffeted around by the tide and scoured by sand and rocks, it’s unlikely that we’ll get any meaningful trace evidence. There is one thing though, despite the damage to the body, John from Forensics said it looked like something had been burned into the chest. He thought the guy could have been branded.” Joe shook his head sadly, despite his years in the police it still dismayed him, but no longer surprised him, that one human being could treat another in such a barbaric way.

“Which explains why the Chief Super is taking a direct interest, and why the Boss is SIO,” Cathy added, “it’s another HM killing.”

“Too soon to say for sure, but it’s certainly looking like it may

be. We still haven't got a name for the victim, but the usual DNA, fingerprint and dental record checks were all conducted yesterday so I'm hoping the Boss will have something more for us when she arrives. In the meantime, Cathy, I'd like you to start adding to the HM board." Over the previous months a detailed 'murder board' had been developed to provide a visual aid to help identify potential leads and links, anything that may help in the hunt for the killers. "I'll forward everything I receive from Fleetwood on to you."

"Got it Boss..., Joe..., whoever you are! I'll get right on it."

"Thank you. And as for you Detective Constable Jackson, the post-mortem examination is scheduled for this morning, would you care to tag along?" Joe asked, knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt what the answer would be.

"Yes please Boss!" Although still young and with only limited experience when she'd joined the team, Autumn had impressed her colleagues not only with her unflagging keenness, but also with an ability to see beyond the obvious and identify less apparent possibilities. As her confidence had grown, matched by her willingness to take on any challenge, Joe had a sneaking suspicion that he might well be calling her 'Boss' at some point in the not too distant future.

"Okay, there's no need for us to be there for the full examination, we'll only be in the way, but we do need to attend in time to receive the initial findings and to observe any particular issues that the pathologist may want to point out."

"Cool!"

"No, it is many things Detective Constable Jackson, but cool is definitely not one of them." Joe corrected.

CHAPTER TWO

While Autumn attempted, without much success, to control her excitement at the prospect of attending her first post-mortem, twenty-five miles away in the Lancashire Constabulary HQ the Desk Sergeant manning Reception experienced a similar sensation as he looked up, smiling broadly at the new arrival stood before him. This was the moment he'd been waiting for, and the reason he'd practiced in front of a mirror until he knew he'd got it just right.

"Will oi'll be banjaxed if id ain DC oi Gray from da polis, back from a hollydae in da emerald oyul. Till me lassy, how did y' gid on wid de rest o' da littul people, bejabers?" He beamed at her waiting for a reply.

Despite the appalling, borderline criminal, attempt at an Irish accent, and knowing it would only encourage him further, Detective Chief Inspector Yvie Gray could not help but smile, briefly.

"I didn't really catch what you just said there Bill, but I think you might have got your false teeth in back to front again." The crestfallen expression on the face of her self-appointed comedic tormentor almost made her relent, but not quite. Replacing the pen after printing her name and time of entry on the daily log-sheet Yvie made for the double doors and the stairway that would take her up to the Chief Super's office. "Oh, and Bill," she called over her shoulder, "the only things round here that could be described as 'littul' are your chances of reaching retirement before getting your arse well and truly kicked!" Yvie listened out for Bill's final riposte of, 'Oi knew oi'd nailed it', and his chuckle as the doors closed behind her.

Approaching the open office door Yvie could see that the Chief Super was speaking to someone on the phone. She waited politely at the door for a second or two until she was noticed, and was then immediately waved into the room and towards a couple of small armchairs where

coffee was waiting on a side table.

“Morning Boss,” Yvie said when the Chief Super put down her mobile. At work, she still couldn’t bring herself to address the unassuming but remarkable woman before her as Anne, and definitely not as Annie, despite the friendship that had developed between them since sharing a harrowing fell-top experience less than six months earlier.

“Good morning Yvie. You’re looking well, spending time with your Irish paramour certainly seems to be agreeing with you.”

“Hah! As you well know Ma’am, James isn’t Irish he just happens to own a house there.”

“Yes, I notice that you didn’t quibble over paramour though,” the Chief Super said with a raised eyebrow. “Seriously though, are you managing to make the whole long-distance thing work? I’d hate to think I may lose you to the Gardai.”

“There’s no danger of that Boss. James is working on a new book so he’s happy to split his time between here and Ballycotton. It works out surprisingly well, the flight to Cork is only just over an hour and he picks me up at the airport, or the other way round. The extra few days last week were for the Oyster Festival, it was absolutely brilliant, I’ve not had that much fun in years. But you didn’t ask me to come in just to talk about my long weekend.”

“No, and I’m sorry to darken the mood but it appears that HM have raised their ugly heads again.” HM, or HMycelium as they had chosen to call themselves, were a shadowy group believed to be made up of extreme eco-activists and wannabe pagans. The group had claimed responsibility for a number of ‘executions’ as they termed them and were also believed to be responsible for the murder of an undercover officer’s wife and children. The same officer who had worked with Yvie and the team on the Fair Snape case.

“It was only a matter of time I suppose, the lockdowns must have cramped their style somewhat,” Yvie added. “Too much to hope

for that they'd done the decent thing and crawled back into the hole in the ground from which they emerged. Is it the body on the beach?"

"Yes. The victim's name was Patrick Haythornthwaite, but that hasn't been released yet so you'll need to let Joe know before he goes over to Blackpool for the PM. We believe that his wife is on holiday somewhere in the Lakes with their two girls and her parents, but we haven't been able to contact them yet. He was a Senior Planning Officer with the County Council and had recently been seconded to assist a team involved in discussions on the Morecambe Bay Tidal Barrage."

"I thought that the proposal had been shelved?"

"It had, but since the price of gas went through the roof, it seems that everything is now back on the table. They're even talking about fracking for shale gas, for God's sake!"

"If he was simply involved in the discussions around a sustainable energy project, one that may never happen, that's hardly a crime against the environment. Are we sure that HM are behind it?"

"It looks like he could have been branded Yvie. FIT managed to spend a little time at the scene before the body had to be moved. Helen and John agreed that there was evidence of something being burned deeply into the chest. It wasn't possible to make out what it was, we'll know more when the body has been cleaned up for the PM." Yvie had worked closely with Helen, the head of the Forensic Investigation Team, on the Fair Snape case and had huge respect for the woman and her painstaking attention to detail. If she'd gone so far as to venture an opinion that it could have been a branding, there was little doubt that it would be exactly that.

The Chief Super was interrupted by a knock at the door and Yvie was unable to mask her surprise when it was opened and the undercover officer she had previously known as Keith Sim, a man she'd once described to her boss as being 'a bit of a knob', entered the office.

"I know you two have worked together before, but let's do a

proper introduction this time. DCI Yvie Gray meet DI Tom Barron. I've asked Tom to join us as he knows more about HM than anyone else on the Force."

"It's good to see you again.... Tom," Yvie said as she got to her feet. "You're looking well, certainly a lot better than last time I saw you."

"Thank you Ma'am, I'm not exactly sure when that was, certain things are still a bit foggy, probably for the best."

"Less of the Ma'am, you know me better than that. As I recall it, you were unconscious and being dragged feet first down from the fell, at speed if I remember correctly. The Daughters had to get you out of there as quickly as possible to make sure there was no way for the Winter Beast to return."

"Yeah, the Chief Super filled in a lot of the blanks for me. We got the job done though!"

"We certainly did, and we'll always be grateful for the part you played," Yvie paused and looked directly at the young man. "But that was then, and this is now. It's a different case Tom, and regrettably, I'm not sure it's one you can be involved in." Yvie glanced at the Chief Super, expecting to hear a similar comment and surprised at what followed instead.

"As I said Yvie, Tom knows more about HM than anyone else. Since his return to work, and in addition to his routine case load, anything potentially HM related has been copied across to Tom. The role has been information gathering only but...." The Chief Super was again interrupted, this time by an outburst from Yvie, something she would not have tolerated from anyone else.

"Ma'am, how can..... DI Barron," it was going to take time to stop thinking of him as Keith Sim, "be involved in this investigation given his history with HM?" Yvie was referring to an operation run by the Chief Super that had gone disastrously, and tragically, wrong. After spending many months trying to infiltrate HM, Tom as she now knew

him had eventually been accepted, or at least he was led to believe that was the case. He was invited to attend a secret midnight HM gathering in Carlisle, supposedly to help finalise their response to a decision by Highways England to approve plans for a new motorway link in Cumbria. While he was away from home, travelling to what turned out to be a non-existent meeting, someone from HM poured several litres of petrol through the letterbox in the front door of his house, and then put a match to it. His wife, his three year old son and his baby daughter were asleep upstairs, the fire took hold so quickly that they didn't manage to get out.

"You're right Yvie, of course you are. Officially, he can't go anywhere near it." Iron Annie nodded her agreement, all the while maintaining eye contact with her protégé. "However, I believe that you and I share a certain view on the place for, not to mention the value of, officialdom. As Senior Investigating Officer it's entirely up to you, he can advise at arm's length or he can be part of the team, your choice." Yvie was about to reply, although not one hundred percent sure how to phrase her refusal in terms that would avoid causing unnecessary offence, when Tom got in first.

"It's over three years since I lost them. They are still my first thought every morning and my last thought every night, and I doubt that will ever change. I don't want it to ever change. But the white-hot rage that I felt, the need for the type of revenge that would have left people dead or dying, has cooled. I know that is not the man I am and, more importantly, I know that it's not the man that my family would have wanted me to be. I want whoever is behind HM brought to justice. I want them to rot in jail, to pay for what they did to my family and to everyone else they've harmed. I would very much like to be part of this investigation DCI Gray, but I do understand if that doesn't sit right with you."

Yvie crossed over to where the young man was nervously waiting for her answer, despite his closing words she could sense his need to be involved. She didn't make the decision until a split second before

throwing her arms around his chest and giving him a very unprofessional hug.

“The guys will be pleased to have you back on the team, they never got chance to say goodbye after Fair Snape.” Which was true, the man they had known as Keith Sim, the same man who had briefly experienced the bloodlust of the Winter Beast, had vanished from hospital, not to be seen again.

“That was my doing I’m afraid Yvie, I had him under close observation in a private clinic for two weeks after the events of that night. No lasting effects, though unfortunately he’s still a bit of a knob!”

“Oi! I am still here you know.” Tom laughed, the tension instantly gone from the room.

“One more thing, we still don’t know how HM found out that Tom was working undercover. However unlikely it may seem, a leak from this building isn’t impossible, that’s why I’ve still got your old team working out of Clitheroe. I never thought I’d say this, but I don’t think it would be wise to set up an HM incident room here. You can continue to use the Clitheroe office or, and this is just a thought, I have the use of a house near Great Eccleston. Tom can stay there for the duration, it’s private, convenient, and there’s plenty of parking that can’t be seen from the road. Any comings and goings won’t attract attention, what do you think?”

“Given the circumstances I think that may be a good idea Boss. While we’re on the subject of leaks though, there is one that I’d like to see plugged once and for all. How the hell did Bill find out that I’d been to Ireland?” Yvie was surprised to see that, despite all her years of experience, Iron Annie wasn’t quite quick enough to hide the guilty smile that flickered across her face like a shadow.

CHAPTER THREE

June 2019 - Fender

Fender Goulding had been christened in honour of his father's most treasured possession, his favourite guitar. Unfortunately, he'd never been able to gain the same level of interest or affection, from either parent, as that lavished on the hallowed instrument, something he'd been conscious of from the time of his earliest memories. Now, as an adult, he was very much aware that in a matter of weeks, or at best a few months, he was going to be alone in the world. The unexpected and largely unwanted child of a minor celebrity rock musician father and an outrageous pop-artist mother, who by the time he was born were both living on past glories, was doing the best he could to ease the passing of his elderly Irish housekeeper as she approached the end of her days. She was the only person who had ever really cared for him, the only one to show him something approaching a mothers' love, the only person he had ever loved in return.

Maire McKenna had been hired by his parents when Fen was just two years old. They didn't particularly want a nanny or a housekeeper but thought it may keep Social Services at bay if there was someone around to care for the kid when he eventually came out of hospital. The child, who they claimed had been 'looked in on' every fifteen minutes and was asleep in his cot in an upstairs room when last checked, had somehow managed to fall into the embers of a bonfire at one of his parent's lavish parties. Drawn by the fireworks and music but ignored by the dozens of adults, any of whom could have, should have, realised that it wasn't right for a two year old to be wandering alone outside after midnight. Fen suffered serious and disfiguring burns to his head, facial damage that could never be repaired, only softened, by several years of reconstructive surgery.

Home schooled when the cruelty of his peers became unbearable, hidden away from visitors to the family home in case his appearance

may cause offence or upset, and with no other external contact, Maire had been his only real companion for the past twenty years. As a child she had taken him out for walks in the narrow country lanes that surrounded the farm his parents had purchased many years before, the majority of the land rented out when his father had found that even playing at farming was hard work.

As he grew older, right up until the time Maire could no longer drive, they would venture away from the flat plain of the Fylde Coast and walk the hills and valleys of Bowland, Cumbria, Northumberland, Yorkshire and Derbyshire. All the while she would teach Fen about the birds and insects they encountered, the trees and the plants, the creatures that lived in and around the ponds and streams, the lakes and rivers. How everything around them was part of a whole, interdependent and equally worthy irrespective of species, size or appearance.

Fen's mother died of a drug induced heart attack just after his thirteenth birthday. Despite never having experienced his mother's love, her death still shocked and saddened him. It was Maire who had comforted him in the long hours when his father was absent, drowning his own grief in alcohol. She calmed him with stories of her childhood in Ireland or they would watch wildlife documentaries on TV together, the only television programmes she would ever entertain. He had at first been puzzled that she would shed tears at scenes of dead seabirds coated in oil, turtles and whales tangled in discarded fishing nets, the destruction of habitats and breeding grounds, but remain resolutely dry-eyed at the often savage images of nature when red in tooth and claw. The lesson of her simple morality was not lost on him.

Finding himself at a loose end one morning when Maire had driven over to Knott End to shop; although the bulk of the groceries were ordered on-line, she always insisted on selecting meat, fruit and vegetables herself, Fen came across a coiled straw archery boss in an outbuilding. When an actor drinking buddy of his parents had been given a bit part in an early episode of Game of Thrones they'd thrown

a themed party to celebrate, complete with a load of expensive equipment. Within a few weeks archery had become yet another short-lived fad that his father had soon tired of, his alcohol intake meaning that the target was left largely untroubled. More out of boredom than any particular interest Fen rolled the heavy straw boss outside and managed to lift it up onto its stand. After rooting around for half an hour or so he had found some paper targets to fasten to the boss, a bow and a quiver holding just four arrows, the remainder having been launched into oblivion by his father. He found the bow very heavy to draw back and his first three attempts missed the target completely, but his fourth somehow found the white outer ring, and he was hooked. When Maire returned she found the boy deeply engrossed in YouTube archery videos and already compiling a list of the equipment that he would need for his new hobby, one that would become almost an obsession over the coming years.

A few days before his sixteenth birthday, while sat at the kitchen table painstakingly trimming dyed turkey feathers to fletch a batch of arrows with, he overheard his father on the phone to one of the hangers-on that still fawned around him. He was complaining loudly that the old housekeeper had been diagnosed with Alzheimers. Fen didn't know what that meant, but it was what his father said next that rocked his world – he intended to get rid of her, to evict her from her home and, 'let Social Services find the miserable old cow a bed'. He knew better than to plead with his father, who had never displayed any understanding of right and wrong other than in terms of his own self-interest, so instead he determined to find a way to deal with the problem himself.

The solution presented itself only a few days later. Returning from his customary practice session at the archery butt he'd created in the paddock beyond the garden, Fen saw that his father was already slumped, passed out drunk, on a recliner in the gazebo. This was where the monster who was threatening to get rid of Maire, he could think of him in no other way now, habitually spent his afternoons, strumming

an old acoustic guitar and drinking himself into oblivion, sometimes with company, often alone.

It was the work of a moment to empty the contents of an almost full bottle of Armagnac over his father's unresponsive chest and legs, pouring carefully to ensure that the liquid soaked into his clothing and the upholstered recliner rather than running off onto the grass beneath. He wiped the bottle to remove any fingerprints then picked up his father's cigarettes and lighter from where they lay on the lawn next to his discarded guitar. He lit a cigarette, hating the taste of it in his mouth, then placed the pack and the lit cigarette on his father's lap before operating the lighter for a final time and touching it to his brandy soaked clothing. He jumped back as the spirit 'whoomphed' into flame, tossed the lighter into the blaze, then walked away without a single backwards glance.

Fen spent the latter part of the next six years caring for Maire as she had once cared for him. In the later stages, when her condition deteriorated rapidly, he fed her, bathed her and dressed her. He was at her bedside for all her waking hours as they watched an endless loop of David Attenborough videos together.

He was aware that Maire had been brought up in the Catholic faith but had long since turned her back on all forms of organised religion. When it became clear that the time remaining to her was limited, and needing to mark her passing in a manner of which she would have approved, Fen spent time researching different types of funeral. Many of the online suggestions for non-religious, alternative or humanist funerals that he found seemed to cater to the needs of the attendees rather than the beliefs of the deceased. He posted a question on a nature and environment forum where he had noticed a thread relating to simple 'natural' burials, and was surprised to get a response within minutes. Rather than a sales pitch the reply simply asked who the funeral was for, and what he or she had been like in life. There was also a suggestion that in the interests of privacy he should send his response via a WhatsApp message rather than post personal details on the

website. Despite the simplicity of the question, composing his reply was one of the most emotional tasks that Fen had ever attempted. Eventually, pleased that he had done Maire justice, he sent his message which also indicated that he intended this to be a 'home burial' under the shade of her favourite tree.

It was later the same evening when Fen received a WhatsApp response. There was an apology for the delay and, surprisingly, a touching recognition of the love he had for Maire, which the sender said came through so clearly in his words. The suggestion for her burial was limited to nothing more than a simple linen shroud, a wreath made from the flowers and foliage that Maire had loved, picked freshly by himself from the local hedgerows on the morning of her burial, and no music other than birdsong.

Reading those few perfect words, so close to his own thoughts, tipped Fen over the edge and, for once, he let the tears run freely down his face. The message also included an offer of help, the only cost being a contribution towards travel expenses if the burial was to take place a significant distance away from the north-west, and a name - Falcon.