The Foul Play Club

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Events take place from November to December 1988

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(*Boadiceas Brooch* takes place entirely in October 1989)

Chapter 1

Tea and Crumpets at the Foul Play Club

Monday 5 November

'In my view there are three degrees of perfect murder'.

The weight of the cathedral pressed down on the sombre stonework underground, and the heavy oak door of the committee room, with it's massive iron hinges, creaked auspiciously as each member filed in. The door was carved with the sour graffitti from frustrated sixteenth century monks. Three window grills let some streetlight onto this strange gathering of sensible souls, who were toying with dark death and unpredictable fate. It was here, half buried in the earth, in a crypt, aptly dug out of the earth, that was the setting for the monthly meeting of the Foul Play Club. Of course, it was all good fun.

The crypt had been tarted up for the twentieth century. Nice sofa and lounge seats were set in a semi-circle, a crackling fire in the medieval fireplace, a grill toaster, tea caddy and teapot to one side with china cups, and some glasses of the bishop's favourite sherry, and the bishop himself, gracious, beaming with joviality despite his strange addiction to murder. The bishop was a big man, boistrous, and his youthful handsomness was still present under the jowls and somewhat flabby body.

The club was his idea in fact, to investigate old unsolved murders. Each member introduced a different murder and today it was Gordon Micklethwaites turn, only he took a different tack. It was his mothers fault really. The bishop told her they were on the lookout for a historian to sort out the files, and write a new history of the diocese. Then she looked at him slyly.

'They have a club you know, the Foul Play Club they call it. It's all about murder…'

She knew that would pique Micklethwaites interest, and she was right. He repeaed his first sentence for effect, and to buy time to read his notes.

> ‘In my view there are three degrees of perfect murder. For example, what I will call Lesser Degree of Perfect Murder, or third degreee, might be that of a lone hitch-hiker, whose body is found by the side of the road. In this instance there is no doubt about the murder having taken place, we have a body after all, but because the murder was committed by a stranger, unknown to the victim, it will be very difficult for the police to find the suspect.
>
> Such murders are surprisingly common, and usually unresolved. In New Zealand for example, where I come from, there are several unsolved murders of this kind, involving vagrants or hitch-hikers. In this instance, the skill of the killer is not in his or her method, but only in his choice of a stranger as the victim. We could all of us commit such murders, but we will certainly not have any motive to do so. Only a rare few pyschopaths kill without reason’.

Micklethwaites paused and thought to himself, is that true? Do you always need a reason to murder? He hastened on with his speech.

> ‘I call this a perfect murder only because for some pyschcopaths it represents a kind of success, however in my view the murder is far from perfect. The world at large knows that a murder has been committed, it is simply the absence of a causal link between victim and suspect that makes such murders so hard to solve.
>
> ‘The next definition of perfect murder, which I call the Second Degree of Perfect Murder, is when the victim is the *only* person to be aware that a murder has taken place. In other words the murderer has successfully disguised the murder as an accident or misadventure. In order to achieve this the suspect must act with a great deal of cunning and care. It is surprising how many husbands try to kill wives, and vice-versa. Domestic murders happen so often that the police must automatically assume the surviving partrner is the prime suspect.
>
> ‘So this type of murder could be a drowning. For example, again using New Zealand as an example. A husband took his wife boating and she went for a swim, but he motored away, and in the cold water of the lake she quickly became exhausted and drowned. He informed the police. He got prosecuted by the way, because a fisherman had seen the incident and the wifes frantic splashing and calling, and later contacted the police. But, he was acquitted, because it could not be proved it was deliberate or not. Some people believed he literally got away with murder. So my advice to any of you contemplating such a move, is to think again, divorce is much cheaper and far less messier’

Micklethwaites little joke aroused not a ripple, except Mrs Crochett (pronounced ‘croquet’) who nodded sagely as if she had been plotting the demise of her husband for twenty years in the vegetable patch, and having met Mr Crochet briefly, Micklethwaite could well understand hs wife’s ambition in that direction.

'The last degree of perfect murder I shall call the First Degree of Perfect Murder'.

This awkwardly constructed sentence Micklethwaite realised had strangely biblical overtones 'the first shall be last' ect, and Gordon hoped that Bishop would not be offended, and hurried on.

'This is where even the victim is not even aware that murder has taken place. In this case even if the victim survived, they might also genuinely believe that it was an accident. If I was to sketch a possible scenario for a perfect murder then I think for example, in New Zealand, hunting accidents are extremely common.

Every year one or two deer hunters get killed by their hunting partners in the forest, and no one suspects that these deaths are anything other than accidental or carelessness. But what if the shooter was having an affair with the victim's wife? Or they were business partners and one wanted to gain the entire business for himself?

The sheer number of hunters killed over the decades has lead me to ponder whether all of these deaths really are accidental in nature, or whether some might in fact be murder. Traditionally in New Zealand, the shooter is not prosecuted by the police, indeed often the wife of the dead hunter will publicly forgive the shooter. The hunter will state that he killed his 'best mate' and he will never hunt again, and that publicly is the end of the matter.

'Even if the police suspected there was foul play, how would they prove it? An accidental bullet makes the same mark as a deliberate bullet. Unless there were clear evidence of a falling out between the two, or some unusual business or financial stress, or suspicious meetings between the hunter nad his partners wife, it could almost be seen as the perfect murder. Even if the other person miracuously survived, they too would think of it as an accident'.

So in this final degree of perfect murder we need three conditions. First, the death of the person has to look accidental. Second, it must involve a certain naturalness about the event. The victim must in fact be engaged in a normal or usual activity, such as swimming for example, or walking, or hunting, or driving a car. Thirdly, if it is possible, there should be neutral witnesses

Micklethwaite paused again, and sensed that he had more interest from the audience after his last sentence. He wasn't sure how to end his little presentation.

'So there you have it, three degrees of Perfect Murder. I will finish with this thought: how would you commit a perfect murder in England?'

The bishop looked impressed and chuckled:

'Excellent Gordon, I knew you would be a good addition to the club. Well chaps, how would you commit the perfect murder?'

Bert Pringle chirped up in his broad Devonshire accent.

> 'What about toppling him out of the church belfry? No surviving that'.

> 'But wouldn't the victim know he'd been pushed?' someone objected.

> 'I thought of that Jerry. The murderer would have pretended to grab the victim from the edge, but accidentally shoved him over'.

The bishop thought this scenario unlikely.

> 'How would you get up to the belfry in the first place Albert, and why? Surely a cliff would work just as well?'

> 'I thought we were supposed to solve murders not plot them?' Mr Crochet interjected.

> 'Well yes' said Bert cunningly 'but once you know how yer gonna a murder someone then you can work backwards you know, and look for the trail of dodgy evidence…'

The conversation became animated as these respectable citizens cogitated and argued ways of murdering other respectable citizens. The bishop bumbled around topping up the sherry glasses (perhaps a prime reason for the popularity of the club) and Micklethwaite felt pleased that his little speech had gone so well. There were sixteen people this evening, a good turnout, and Micklethwaite knew hardly anyone.

Bert Pringle worked in the Cathedral workshop as general fix-it man and maintenance manager and had a team of workmen to help. Bert was a joking sort, got on with everyone, and usually got their names wrong.

> 'You know what they say around here? Send for Bert when the pipes burst! Send for Bert when the bell has fallen off! Have you ever maintained a house Jordan? Well try maintaining a bloody cathedral!'

There were two clergymen who Micklethwaite didn't know, some other office staff from the vestry, Gerald and his wife, and a number of cathedral stalwarts and the Bishops Chaplain, Martin Strange, who he hadn't talked to. Lording over proceedings was His Grace, Percival Edward Somerville, bishop of Chaucester Cathedral. Loud, gregarious, fulsome, everyone's chum. As the group gravitated towards the tea urn, a woman brought round a plate of toasted crumpets and cake. The bishop slurped his tea loudly and looked regretfully at the toasted tea-cake.

> 'I cannot, everyone says I'm getting podgy, sigh. No sugars, no cakes, nothing interesting at all'.

He turned to Micklethwaite.

> 'I must say Gordon you have set a new standard for the club, a most stimulating discussion. I had not thought of the concept of murdering someone who would not know they'd been murdered, even if they survived. Does that mean there must have been many murders that we don't know about, all

around us in fact? I should take a funeral with more sceptism now!'

The bishop roared at his own joke

'Thank you. errr… your grace'.

'Oh call me Percy, everyone does.

'You start tomorrow? Terribly neglected the archives, we didn't have the money you see. So your appointment is a godsend to make some progress'

Gordon nodded. He was beginning his work tomorrow at the cathedral archives on Tuesday. Bert Pringle joined in.

'Felicity told me she's gonna give you all the dusty stuff she's been hoarding for years, yer know, newpaper clippings, magazines, photos, thirty years of paper to go through, maybe fifty, at least back to the 1930's'.

'How long you here for Gordon?' asked the bishop

'Erhmm about eight weeks I think'.

'You are going to be jolly busy! You have your mother to thank, as she tipped me off about you, and the Labour Department student assistance scheme. Worked nicely for everyone I must say. Now, I must to talk to my parishioners'.

As the bishop busied away Gordon privately thought his mother could have been less helpful, but the money would be useful. He had to get back to New Zealand somehow, and was trying not to borrow any more money from her.

'The bish looks pleased as punch'.

Bert drank a generous sherry and remarked further.

'You know he's up for the top job Jordan?'

'Eh?'

'Archbishop of Canterbury. They hold a big conflab in a month or two to decide, oh Percy here is the number one pick they reckon'.

Micklethwaite later found out that this was all true. The local *Chaucester Gazette* had a big story that the Percival Somerville was already a candidate to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury, with the bishops nomination and the synod to pick a candidate due soon. He was considered by most pundits the front runner. A safe pair of hands the newspaper said, with no outrageous ideas like the previous incumbent, and a genial manner that in fact was largely genuine.

Having secured a cup of luke-warm tea Micklethwaite was buttonholed by a man who introduced himself as the Bishop's chaplain, Martin Strange, who vehemently insisted there could be no such thing as a perfect murder.

'The victims will always leave some evidence of their misdoing, intentionally or not'.

Marti Strange emphasised his points with a pointy finger, and in a squeaky kind of voice, very unsuited for the seriousness of the pulpit Gordon thought.

> 'The best way to solve a murder is to focus on the sin, find who benefits immediately from the nefarious act. People murder for instant gain first, even if a long term gain emerges later'.

Gordon nodded politely and eased himself away from the chaplains staring blue eyes, and at the door people were shoving on their coats. Bert teased the bishop.

> 'Better watch out on these dark nights Percy. There will be other bishops who want the job for Archbishop now, they might want to knock you off?'

> 'Oh no dear boy, surely not, unthinkable. Still a good point, I shall steer clear of belfries eh?'

Outside, the November night was cold and all of a sudden a starburst erupted into the air. Of course! It was Guy Fawkes night, and loud bangs and whizzes accompanied Micklethwaite as he walked down the wet dark lane of Cathedral Close to his lodgings in one of the Dioceses row of cottages. It had been a satisfactory evening, and his little speech on perfect murdering had gone down rather well he thought, purely abstract of course. It could never happen in real life.

Chapter 2

A Rustle in the Archives

Tuesday 6 November

The Cathedral offices smelt of polish and vacumning as he pushed open the front door, and immediately knocked on the first door on the left labelled 'Accounts'. He almost tripped over a smallish parcel beside the door.

A deep woman's voice answered, so he entered into what Bert called the 'dragons den'. Mrs Violet Rattenbury was seated at a desk by the window, which gave a good overview over the courtyard and carpark, and framed the great northern tower of Chaucester Cathedral. Mrs Rattenbury was fairly monolithic as well, large in body, with a square shaped head and a hint of a moustache on her lip. Perhaps she was sixty, or sixty five? She sat in a winged chintz chair with a cane propped up on her desk. She struggled to walk, but despite that was (as everyone had warned him) a formidable women.

'Mrs Rattenbury? I think this parcel is for you'.

A deep voice growled back

'Where was it? Oh put it here. Those courier drivers cant be bothered to knock any more. Who are you?'

'Gordon Micklethwaite. I think I need you sign off this work contract'.

She nodded without looking at him and proceeded to open the parcel first. Inside was a note.

'Oh, really, stupid people! I don't even like marzipan…!'

Then she remembered Gordon standing there

'How long are you working here for?'

'Eight weeks I think, the bishop was vague…' She snorted.

'He's always vague!'

‘I suppose he’s a busy man’.

That brought forth another snort.

‘Where’s the paper?’.

She signed, photo copied it, handed it back and that it seems was that. On his way out she gave a peremptory instruction.

‘Make sure you fill out your hours correctly each week, or you won’t get paid!’

‘Arrr, ok’.

‘Here take this thing. Give it to Bert, he likes sweet stuff!’

He was pleased to escape, for she had a strange sense of menace about her, and bumped into Bert Pringle who was pinning up a notice on the corridor noticeboard.

‘Escaped the dragon eh? Felicity is in the archive room, she’ll show you the ropes. ‘

He lowered his voice consipiratorally.

‘I call ‘er Mrs Rottenbury’,

Gordon handed over the parcel

‘This is for you. From Mrs Rattenbury’.

He looked really surprised. And whispered back

‘A cake? First thing she’s ever given me apart from a pain in the neck’.

‘There’s a note.’

‘Oh I see, someone must like the old buzzard after all. A sort of simnel cake, but a bit early for Easter eh? Still no complaints, I’ll have that for morning tea. Come and join me, … Jordan....’

‘Gordon’.

‘Ah, yes Jordon. I’d wish she’d retire’.

Gordon nodded towards Mrs Rattenbury’s closed door, and whispered.

‘Is she sixty?’

‘Way more than that, pushing seventy I reckon. Can hardly walk, dunno what the bishop sees in her really’.

‘Perhaps she does a good job?’ suggested Gordon.

Bert considered this novel idea.

‘Yeah, I grant she’s good at accounts I guess, though she probably siphons a bit off on the quiet, but she digs into everyone’s business if you know what I mean. You can’t keep secrets from the old bag. She’s been here so long I reckon they built the cathedral around her. See me at my workshop for a

cuppa, just round the corner here'.

He vaguely waved outside to the carpark and went away laughing at his joke. Gordon walked down the corridor and pushed open the door marked 'Archives'. It was his first day.

A slim, upright woman was sitting in a chair at her desk and stood up as he came in.

'Gordon Micklethwaite?'

'Yes'.

'Felicity Given, how do you do?'

They shook hands, and her flesh hand was luke-warm, and the room was chill.

'Sorry, The heater hasn't warmed up the room yet. If we get some firewood we can get a fire roaring, which will be comforting. It's such a big room to heat'.

It was, and although there were some windows onto the courtyard, the room was suffocated by three walls full of bookshelves stacked high like crumbling cliffs. Boxes, books, files, and more files had overflowed the shelves onto the filing cabinet and onto the desks, which had been squeezed into a corner by the advancing paperwork. On some shelves were stuck fading printed numbers, which Gordon realised were related to years. That shelf went back to 1922!

Micklethwaite must have looked dismayed at this grim sight, for she followed his glance around the room.

'It's a bit disorganised isnt it?' suggested Felicity

'Is this my job?'

'To sort it out? Well that would be a minor miracle. It's about sixty years of files to deal with so we definitely need a young man!'

A hint of a smile there.

'I'm twenty-seven'.

'Hmm, young enough. You have a history degree?" she asked.

'Yes. Masters'.

'We actually need someonewho is good at filing…'

'Oh, I thought I was hired for my skill and intelligence?'

He said this meaning to be ironic, but she riposted

'I thought you were hired because you were cheap.'

'Ouch. Now I'm beginning to have some mis-givings, Miss Givens'.

She replied with a thin smile.

‘An old joke Mr Micklethwaite, so sharp too, mind you don’t cut yourself ‘.

This byplay established their relationshp immediately. Each could give as good as they got, and despite the age difference understood and enjoyed each others sense of humour. She was old (at least by Micklethwaites standards, maybe fifty?). Quite thin and petite with some grey hair and a kindly face that looked a little worn out. She seemed almost exactly the sort of person who would end up in the cathedral archives, and she dressed somewhat dourly, so you would not normally look at Felicity Givens, and even if you did you would promptly forget her. She also lived in on of the cottages on Cathedral Close. He waved his hand generously.

‘This is your job?’

‘I work part-time tweny hours a week, and mostly I’m hunting for lost files it seems. It’s very slow, I’m trying but it needs someone with more energy. Violet has helping out lately.

‘Violet?’

‘Mrs Rattenbury’.

He put his coat on the hook by the door and noticed the array of old keys hanging down from hooks, like tidy skeletons in a cupboard.

‘Lot of keys here?’

‘Lot of doors on a cathedral Mr Micklethwaite’.

‘You can call me Gordon’

‘Ok, I will try that. I’m a Felicity and definitely not a ‘filly’.

He put in his two bobs worth.

‘I’m not that keen on Gordy’.

‘People call you that?’

‘And worse…’

At that moment the bishop breezed in.

‘Ah, my favourite Filly’.

And he gave Felicity’s bottom a considerable pat, which Micklethwaite thought would offend the stern-looking archivist, but she surprisingly simpered a little, as if she was used to this familiarity even after telling Gordon a second ago that she was definitely not a ‘filly’. Bishops must have more mana.

‘Really Your Grace’.

‘You have a new assistant I see, splendid’.

The Bishop always used words like ‘eccellent’, or ‘wonderful’, or ‘praiseworthy’ and Micklethwaite could easily have mistaken him for an enthusiastic and successful coal merchant, he had that kind of manner.

'I have this wonderful idea Gordon. We need a new history of the Cathedral Diocese, I'm sure you would be just the man at this. Yes, yes I know you are only here for a few weeks, but if we could get the funding together eh? What about it? Filly here is spot on archivist but we need a trained historian like yourself to make sense of all the material .

Gordon was a bit too gobsmacked to reply.'

'Think about it anyway, now, I must pick up Mrs Rattenbury for our little jaunt'.

He patted Felicity again on the bottom as he excited out. Indeed he seemed to have come into the Archive Office for the specific reason to pat Felicity's posterior. Felicity shrugged as the Bishop left and remarked

'He's not serious is he?' asked Gordon

'About the Diocese history? He might be. He does have a good many bright ideas'.

As Gordon looked down the corridor he saw the bishops old black Bentley, and the bishop was helping Mrs Rattenbury into the car who lumbered with a ponderous gait with the help of a stick. Felicity followed Micklethwaites stare. Her hands clasped each other and she gave a wan smile and watched the bishop drive off. She turned to explain.

'The bishop drives Mrs Rattenbury most Tuesdays, a sort of outing. She can barely walk now, so they park at Beacons Lookout at Chaucester Cliffs, and have a natter and a cup of tea.'

'She seems a bit grumpy…' ventured Micklethwaite

Felicity didn't comment, but then Bert came in with some boxes and commented sourly.

'Taking the old girl for a spin eh? I warned the bishop that hand-brake of 'is is knackered, but he doesn't listen. You tell him Felicity, you've know all about this mechanical stuff.'

Everyone knew that the bishops Bentley was very old, but he was rather fond of it and couldn't be persuaded to update for a newer model. And it was true that the black Bentley was rather a stylish, and comfortable beast, but it kept breaking down.

'I have tried, but it's on his 'to do' list I suppose'.

'Don't reckon the old dragon will be around much longer. Wishful thinking I suppose…'

'Really Bert. Violet isn't that bad…' Felicity protested.

'Oh yes she is…'

That was Bert Pringles parting short as he exited the archive room. Felicity looked at Gordon to explain.

‘They don’t get on I’m afraid. Now these boxes’.

Felicity showed him around the archive shelves which seemd to tower over him. Decades of cathedral records, parish records, church magazines, newsletters, not even arranged chronologically or even named at all, just stuffed into spare corners in a higgedly-piggedly mess. The shelves filled most of the spare wall space, except for the windows and the door. On the tables there was more boxes of files. Gordon gesticulated at the shelves of files.

‘I guess you have a system here Felicity?’

‘Well it’s mostly by years, starting at 1890’.

Gordon pulled a face, and pointed out..

‘But that’s not that far back, when the cathedral was built in 1420 or so?’

‘Yes. Of course, but the oldest records are actually in the Chaucester museum. We just have the newer ones. We actually accumulate files faster than I can sort them. I’m only here for twenty hours a week, and most of that time I spend rescuing material, or trying to find something for the bishop, or Julia, the archdeacon, just finding space for more files’.

Gordon tried teasing her.

‘So you’re the problem here?’.

She pulled a funny face, and stuck out her tongue.

‘Not any longer. Now it’s your problem Mr Micklethwaite I’m pleased to say. Tea?’.

They sat down at the tea-table, so designated because of its large teapot in the middle. Felicity poured. Gordon looked thoughtfully at the massive dusty collection and pondered pontifically.

‘Its like the function of the Diocese itself really. Like a complex clock where most of the mechanism is hidden behind stone walls’.

‘Rather poetical, and believe me the church hiercarchy does not tick like a clock, or rather it hasn’t been wound up for several centuries’.

He smiled at that

‘You are a cynic Miss Givens?’

‘Like yourself. Have you met many of the people who manage the great clockwork of the Diocese?’

‘Well I’m a bit confused with the titles — deacon, archdeacon, chaplain etc, and I haven’t met the bishops wife yet’.

She stirred her tea carefully.

‘He doesn’t have one’.

‘Errr, but my mother said...’

‘His Grace has had two wives, his first died of cancer, oh, eight years ago. Then he married again four years ago. She was twenty eight’.

Gordon stroked his already thining hair

‘He must have been a lot older…’

‘Thirty years older, she was 28, the bishop was 58’.

Micklethwaite murmured.

‘A case of January and May. ‘

‘I’m pleased you know you’re Chaucer. She was not a suitable wife for a bishop. Have a biscuit’.

It was a crisp, certain reply. Despite her diffident manner, when it pleased her Felicity could be quite definite. January was an old codger who married a sweet young girl called May in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales.*

‘Oh, then why…?’

‘Why did he marry someone thirty years younger, well you’re a man so maybe you know. Men can’t seem to resist fluffy, silly blondes’.

‘Oh’ a pause ‘but she died recently?

‘Six months ago. She was a party girl. Alcohol poisoning they believe, and she stopped breathing. Probably choked on her own vomit’.

‘Yuck, poor bishop finding his wife like that.’

‘The bishop was in South Africa on an ecumenical conference at the time’.

Felicity seemed distracted, almost nerbous about the topic he raised, which prompted Gordon to ask his next question.

‘Oh, so who found her dead, the bishops wife I mean?’

Felicity looked up quickly, rattled the empty tea cups on the tray, stood up and went to the door, and perhaps paused for effect, although it was probably just a coincidence.

‘I did’.

Chapter 3

A Sudden Descent off a Steep Slope

Tuesday 6 November

After the morning tea break everything turned to chaos, when Molly Fanshaw the charwoman (who everyone called Moll and she called everyone 'pet' or 'my lover') rushed in at 11 am and said excitedly and with a great sweeping arc of her arm.

'The bishops gone orf a cliff!'

'What?'

'The bishop he's driven off a cliff!'

And Molls arm swept out and descended as if it too were going over the cliff. Felicity stood shocked, and questioned Molly.

'The bishop, but what about Mrs Rattenbury'?'

'Oh shes a gonna to, off Beacons Lookout they were. To their doom!'

'No it can't be true'

Felicity gasped and Micklethwaite looked between the two women with his mouth open. Then Julia Graham the archdeacon strided in and said emphatically.

'No it's not true. The police just rang. The bishop is alive but Mrs Rattenbury was in the car as it went over the cliff'.

She was brisk, efficient, businesslike, a woman who would always rise to these occasions.

'Thank God' Felicity said, then added as an afterthought 'I mean, I'm sorry for Mrs Rattenbury…'

Bert Pringle came trotting down the corridor and heard the end of the conversation.

'Well I'm not sorry'.

‘Really Bert’ said Julia reprovingly ‘Felicity, will you come with me to pick up the Bishop. He’s stranded out there I think’.

‘Ok I will get my coat’ and she rushed out.

‘You can hold the fort Gordon. It was an act of kindness really, I don’t think the bishop was to blame.

‘What happened?’

‘The police told me His Grace was getting the tea things out of the boot of the Bently and the car started to move with Mrs Rattenbury still in it’.

Bert chipped in.

‘I warned him that bloody handbrake was unreliable’.

Felicity came back with her coat and the two women left. Bert looked very pleased.

‘What a to do eh? Well I tell you what Gordon, I got some nice cake this morning, so how about you come round to my workshop in half an hour. It’ll be a celebraton eh?’

‘A celebration?’

‘Yeah. I’m pleased as punch about this’ and with a knowing wink ‘I had my reasons. Come on round’.

After this frantic flurry Gordon tried to settle himeself down in the silence of the archive but nothing came into his head except the vision of the black Bentley hurtling down the cliff like an angel of death. So he walked the short distance to Bert’s workshop, which was a large shed just around the corner from the office on Cathedral Close Lane. This lane ran around the back of the cathedral and on one side had a row of seven small stone cottages, and Micklethwaite was staying in the last one. Each two-storey cottage had a small garden in front and looked undeniably quaint, if that means dingy and cold. Still, it was free lodging.

Bert’s workshop was a large tumbledown brick place, that was originally the stables, with a huge double door at the front and not many windows. The inside was cavernous with piles of timber, iron, and shelves littered with tools and oddments of machinery. Two large sit-down lawnmovers sat where the horses would have been kept. But in one corner there were some comfortable seats and table with a kettle, and a pot-belly stove churning out the heat. The workshop was a lot warmer than the archive room. Bert rammed in two more pieces of wood when he saw Gordon. He chuckled cheerfully.

‘They keep wanting me to get rid of the stove but I tell ‘em to lay off. Winter is perishing in here as it is. Quite a place eh?’

Bert had a small old dog, one of those fluffy types that seem to have no particular breeding and spent their entire life looking wistfully for food. It licked hopefully at Berts heels.

‘Always after a titbit eh Dasiy? Well its your lucky day matey’.

‘Take a pew Jordan.

‘It’s terrible about Mrs Rattenbury…’ Gordon ventured.

‘No it’s not. I have my reasons’.

Bert bustled around to make tea and cut up the cake with its thick marzipan crust into several pieces. Whether by design or accident a large piece fell on the floor and Daisy gobbled it up immediately and his little tail wagged in joy

‘Milk Jordon?’

‘Gordon..’

‘I know that, keep it getting it wrong. You must remind me of the Jordan River or something’.

But Micklethwaite wasn’t listening and was looking at the dog which had sort of frozen in a position. Then it started to twitch and convulse and within thirty seconds just fell over. Micklethwaite was puzzled.

‘What happening to your dog Bert?’

Albert spun around

‘What. Daisy! Get up!’

But Daisy was already lying on its side with not much movement, Albert stroked the dog.

‘Come on Daisy what’s up old girl?’

‘She ate the cake’.

‘Well shes eaten plenty of cake, that couldn’t harm her any ….’

And then the dog convulsed two more times.

‘She’s bloody dead…’

He picked up his dog and cradled it.

‘Just like that’.

Gordon bent over and smelt a piece of the cake on the plate, being careful not to touch it.

‘Would sugar kill that quickly?’

‘Sugar isnt good for a dog’ Albert said miserably ‘I know that, but..’

‘So who made the cake?’

Micklethwaite was thinking out loud.

‘Mrs Rattenbury that bitch, gave it to me, she must have made it.’

‘No, youre wrong. It was delivered in a courier parcel to her door this morn-

ing. I saw it. I saw Mrs Rattenbury open up the parcel. Then she gave it to you. Said she didn't like marzipan'.

Another piece of cake had fallen on the floor and Micklethwaite picked up the piece with a spoon, sniffed it, and then wrapped some paper around it and put it in his pocket.

'Its very sweet, almost sickly'.

'Poisoned? I mean who would want to poison me? I'm harmless, I wouldn't hurt a fly?'

Gordon nodded. This was true.

'That Mrs Rattenbury, she doesn't like me'

'It was sent to Mrs Rattenbury though, someone was trying to poison her'.

Bert looked in disbelieve, and rocked his dead dog in his arms like a baby.

'Poor Daisy. Poor, poor daisy. I could shovel the rest of the cake into this tin?'

'Ok, but don't touch it'.

'Here you do it'.

Micklethwaite carefully put the wrapping paper around the cake and placed it into an old cake tin that Bert had got fron a shelf. Bert placed Daisy on the chair and the two men stood around her, looking at the stiffening body of the dog in a long awkward, wordless pose, until Bert finally broke the silence.

'I thought I was having a bad day, but that old dragon Rottenbury was really having a bad day, eh?'

Micklethwaite had to agree. Being killed once was bad enough, but twice in an afternoon looked like carelessness.

Chapter 4

Many Questions in a Rainy Week

7 November — 11 November

It seemed to rain all week, which was not unusual for Chaucester in November. Drizzle clung to the wet pavements and trickles of water could be heard in the ancient drainpipes of the Cathedral offices.

'I don't like the rain' Bert grumbled, 'causes me no end of work'.

Amongst the cathedral clergy and office workers, even amongst the maintenance men and cleaners, there was stunned disbelieve. Felicity walked around with a strained face, and spent a lot of time comforting the bishop. Micklethwaite hardly saw her.

News trickled in. The Beacons Lookout carpark had been sealed off and the remains of the bishops Black Bently had been salvaged by the police and inspected. Most people thought it was a cruel accident, after all the bishop had been treating Mrs Rattenbury to a picnic in a beauty spot, and the diaster was wholly unforseen.

Martin Strange came in one day and re-introduced himself to Gordon, forgetting that he had harangued Micklethwaite at the last meeting of the Foul Play Club.

'Death moves in mysterious ways'.

Strange's hand was strong but boney, like one of those flying buttresses that held up the cathedral. His eyes were penetrating but slightly jittery, flicking around so although his face was directed at yours, his eyes were moving elsewhere. Gordon found it disconcerting, as was his peculiar religious language. The nice thing about Strange was that he was not big on chit chat. Gordon could ask directly.

'Will the Bishop get arrested?'.

'No. He was a spectator to God's justice'.

That took Micklethwaite aback. Gods justice?

‘But the handbrake was faulty?’

‘The handbrake is not under the bishops jurisdiction. He has the souls of his Diocese to consider, and Mrs Rattenbury was a soul in need of help’.

‘Really? What sort of help?’

Strange stared at Micklethwaite.

‘The help that cometh from understanding what tortures people with doubt’.

It seems clergy always have an answer for all spiritual questions, or turn them into spirirual questions, that was their job after all, but Micklethwaite found the answer unhelpful. He could only shake his head, but Strange did not elaborate.

More news trickled in over the next week. He learned that Mrs Rattenbury was sitting in the passenger seat of course, with her seat belt on. She wasn’t thrown from the car, but sort of lashed in, and the car had fallen and tumbled almost two hundred feet off the cliff, and burst into flames at the bottom. The *Chaucester Gazette* said that the police thought it was a tragic accident, and a memorial and funeral service would be held soon in St Michaels church. The accident was massive news in Chaucester and a photo of the bishop in Wednesdays paper showed him grim faced, tired with none of his ususal jollity.

The newspaper interviewed the bishop who apologised to everyone, assuming it was his mistake. He said he had offered his resignation but was persuaded by the bishop of Winchester and his supporters that he should not do so. The car mechanic was interviewed in the newspaper as well, and said that he had fixed up the handbrake several times and that particular make of Bently was known to have rather a poor handbrake. In fact Micklethwaite got the impression by comments of local councillor and other worthies that no one blamed the bishop at all, and the police investigation was taking a rather light-handed approach. He was the bishop after all.

The editorial in the newspaper took a similar tone, and thought it was a terrible accident, and in a signficant aside, that they did not think it would affect the bishops chances of becoming the next Archbishop of Canterbury.

Mrs Rattenbury funeral was on Friday at St Michales church, and Micklethwaite went, but he wasn’t sure why. It was packed. The bishop was there, with Felicity standing next him. His Grace gave a handsome speech, and indeed it must have been an effort to give a speech at the funeral of the person whose death you had partly caused.

In fact Mrs Rattenbury got a good send off. Bert Pringle was standing next to Gordon and he was surprised to see him there.

‘Didn’t think you liked her Albert’.

‘I'm just making sure the dragon is dead, I have my reasons’.

‘Stop saying that and tell me your reasons’ demanded Micklethwaite.

‘One day I will’.

Then he bent closer to Gordon and whispered.

'Yer know that cake, the cake that killed Daisy. I put it in a tin, cause you said it was poisonous. It's gone'.

'Really. Who has access to your shed?'

'Well, the place is pretty much unlocked through the day, and I'm always going back and forth, yer know. Fixing stuff. Anyone could walk in and grab it.'

Someone on the pew in front glared at them for all these conspiritorial whispers.

'But the whole cake has gone?'

'And the tin'.

Gordon found that interesting. He wondered if the disappearing poisoned cake was was more significant than just a poisoned cake. Someone might have taken a piece of cake if they were tempted to eat it, but they had removed the whole tin. So perhaps they didn't want to touch the cake with their hands, which suggested they knew it was deadly, and that someone must work in the Cathedral offices, or nearby.

'Let me know if any of your workmen get sick, or die'.

'I told 'em not to touch it. Still it was evidence wern't it?'

Gordon nodded and remembered he still had a piece wrapped up in his cottage. He should get it tested, but dear God so much had been happening he had clean forgotten.

After the service he never got a chance to talk to the bishop, but next day did bump into Julia Graham outside the archive office. She was pinning up a notice on the board in the corridor. Something had been troubling him.

'Julia, should I continue in the archives now?'

'Oh course, it will help Felicity a lot. You can take over Mrs Rattenburys work, the Diocese magazine I think she was indexing…'

He nodded and made to leave, and then sensed he now might be his chance to glean some more information.

'Will this affect the bishops chances?'

He hadnt explained himself but she understood immediately what he meant.

'To be Archbishop of Canterbury? Probably not'.

'So how do you appoint an archbishop?'

She pinned up the notice.

'You really want to know? That's easy'.

She said that in what turned out to be an ironical tone.

'Well, you first establish the 'Vacancy in See' committee, archdeacons and

various clergy and laity, members of the Synod, and then they produce what is called 'A Statement of Needs' where they assess what the diocesse needs and what it expects from a new bishop. Then they send that to the Crown Nominations Commission, which consists of higher ups still, higher clergy and laity, any leftover Archbishops, and extra members elected by the committee itself, ecterea, ecterera.

Micklethwaites face grew longer and more confused.

'Well, you did ask. They meet in secret then supply the Prime Minister with two nominations to give an appearance of a fair race, and recommend one candidate, and the Prime Minister will advise the monarch of the preferred choice. They could decide not accept this person, but that is unlikely. The queen will confirm the appointment and the new archbishop enthroned'.

Micklethwaite face drooped at this onslaught of information..

'What a system, how do you make sense of it?'

Julia evinced a quiet smile on her thinnish lips.

'I would be out of a job if didn't, but anyway, its all flim flam. Like any election it's a popularity contest and the candidate has been pre-selected already, and the system simply rubber stamps him (it can only be a him) through the process'.

'Is the bishop popular?'.

'Yes, very, and more importantly he will not rock the boat. The church is fed-up with the last tiresome incumbent who had some novel ideas of his own'.

'But now Mrs Rattenbury has died, I mean a bizarre accident, still….

Julia gave a business-like shrug.

'It wont make much difference. Everyone knew the bishop was being kind. Comforting a parishioner, that sort of thing. The handbrake failed, it can happen on older cars, and another thing…'

'The council is in deep trouble apparently. There was a letter in the *Chaucester Gazette* some months ago about those railings on the The Beacons cliff-top. The writer said they were rotten and unsafe. Indeed he had complained about the railings a year ago as well, so you can argue its as much the Councils fault for not putting up a sturdier barrier, especially as the carpark is on a bit of a slope.'

'Oh really, so it could have happened at any time?"

'Pretty much. No, I think it will be seen as a tragic accident, I doubt if it will affect the choice of Archbishop at all'.

Her lips faintly smiled.

‘All the other candidates are simply not in the race’.

Gordon nodded sagely as if he understood all this, when he was completely baffled by all the ecclesiastical shenaginans in getting anything done. No wonder the church felt locked in the medieval era, and the hierarchy operated more like a Kafka novel.

‘Does the bishop have any points against him?’

‘Only one thing… a bishop should have a wife’.

Her brisk business foosteps echoed off the ancient flagstones as she walked down the corridor, leaving Micklethwaite to ponder. Where had he heard that comment before?

Chapter 5

A Fool on the Hill

Sunday 12 November

It's not that he was suspicious by nature (which he was) or noticed correspondences that other people thought were coincidences (which he did) or even that the difference between a historian and a detective is slight (which it undoubtedly is), it's more that he felt that something was off.

That the bishops young wife should die so abruptly was unusual, not impossible, but then the dramatic toppling of Mrs Rattenbury over a cliff was most peculiar. Any one of these events in an ordinary lifetime might be assumed to be extraordinary, and excite comment, but two such events in six months? Involving a bishop? The same bishop.

Yet people seemed untroubled somehow by this. His second wife was a tempermental child apparently, and the bishop should not have married her. He was probably seduced by that alcoholic wench they said unkindly. It was surpring how vicious were the comments he had heard about her. And then they said it was a tragic accident, and so it was, but so was Mrs Rattenbury's death. It was also a peculiar accident he thought, and it interested him.

It was as if everything graced by His Grace was above comment, or even suspicion. In fact the death of Mrs Rattenbury had rather cleared the air, and Albert Pringle in particular walked with a cheerful manner that seemed postively indecent. So if everything was above board, why had he borrowed his mother's car this gloomy Sunday, and why was he here on a foggy afternoon, walking on a track close to the Beacons Lookout carpark, the same carpark where Mrs Rattenbury had plunged over to her doom.

He told himself he was curious that was all, and something so unlikely as a car running off a cliff, excited his attention. Or perhaps he enjoyed making a mystery out of nothing, as if it was a sort of hobby of his. He didn't for one moment think it was murder when everyone said it wasn't, but he had often noticed that when everyone says something, and believes something, it isnt always true. They just want to be-

lieve its truth, but he just wanted some of his own truth, with his own eyes.

So far he could see nothing. The fog turned even the grass ghostly, but he could smell smoke in the air, proably leaves or stubble, as a farmer burnt off his old crop. The smoke added to the blankness of the view, which suited Gordon perfectly. The cliff track bypassed the Beacons carpark which had been red-taped off rather ostentatiously by the police, so it was reasonable to assume that little had been disturbed. Micklethwaite was pondering ducking under the tape, when a man with a dog emerged from the fog following the track. The dog was old and portly and sniffed at Micklethwaite, indeed the owner was old and portly too.

> 'That's where the bishop lost one of his parishioniers. You heard about that? Straight over, ah she's a nasty cliff orright'.

The dog walker rolled his rrs in the accepted Devonshire manner.

> 'Don't get too close, come on Dribbles, away from that cliff. Ta ta then'.

The man was swallowed in the mist but Micklethwaite didn't see him go, because he had noticed something. Maybe. He had to look again, as the light was poor, but it seem that there was a faint inconsistent line of red pebbles in the carpark. Not overly distinct, but they were sort of obvious from this angle at the top of the carpark, especially looking across to the broken cliff railing. The tell-tale gap was blocked by more stern red tape.

He glanced around and ducked under the tape. Was he seeing things? Yes, it was, not his imagination. There was a line of red pebbles, in fact two lines, about three metres apart, that were in parallel and pointing towards the cliff. He fancied he could even see some sort of skid marks between the pebbles.

He picked up a pebble up. It was a different colour to the stones in the rest of the carpark, and looked as if they had been placed here. By the police perhaps, to mark the direction of the Bentleys careening, but wouldn't they use spray paint or something like that? The pebbles were scuffed away in places and the line kind of disappeared when you got to close to it.. He heard more approaching voices again and stepped back over the tape and looked hard again at the red pebbles, then walked back to his car. For some reason the Beatles song *A Fool on the Hill* got stuck as an earworm in his head nearly all the way back to Chaucester.

His cottage was the last one in a row of seven on Cathedral Close. They were cute but old, built for clergy, and each cottage had a tiny garden frontispiece with a neat gravel pathway to the door. You stepped immediately from the front door into the parlour, with a kicthen behind and a toilet behind that and a sitting room next to the parlor which had become a bedroom. Up very narrow stairs was two tiny bedrooms. He never used the upstairs really, and most people used them for storage. The Chaucester River ran around the back of the cottages.

He grabbed his door key and was keen to put on heater when he was stopped dead in his tracks. The cottage next door had a red pathway. Of small red stones, very similar to the one he had in his pocket. There was nobody about, so he opened the gate, fished out his red stone and compared it to the ones on the pathway. He picked

one up. They matched exactly, the same hue, and the same size. Curious.

'Hallo Gordon, what are doing?'

Micklethwaite jumped a mile, and swung around as Julia Graham walked briskly down the red gravel path.

'Ohh' sorry Julia, ' he stammered and then improvised 'I was admiring the path, the red path, quite striking isn't it?'

Julia shrugged unimpressed.

'I suppose so, better than grey gravel'.

She unlocked the front door of the cottage and looked at him with a puzzled glance.

'Well it's my lunchtime, Sunday is my busy day. Did you want something else? Oh that reminds me, here's the key to Mrs Rattenburys office. We have shifted the accounts to a firm in Chaucester, but she's got a whole lot of files on her desk, can you shift them into the main archive room tomorrow? We want to clear out the room and use it for the archdeacons study. Leave the key in the archive room, with the other keys'.

'I thought you were the Archdeacon?'

'That's right. It's a nice room'.

Micklethwaite stared at her.

'This is your cottage then?"

'Yes. Lunchtime. Goodbye Gordon' .

Not unfriendly just businesslike, and she always spoke in short bursts leaving no room for negotiation of syntax or prattle. He felt embarassed to be caught red-handed so to speak, but she didn't seem bothered. As he opened his own front door, he looked back and stared hard at the red pebble pathway and paused with his hand on the door handle of his cottage.

Surely it must be a coincidence. Really, you wouldn't talk about a perfect murder one week and then be faced with as such a thing two weeks later, would you? But he must go back to the Beacons carpark, this time with a measuring tape and a camera.

'And no one appears to know him or the sounds he appears to make, and he doesn't give an answer, not the fool on the hill'.

He rubbed his head as if to get rid of the ear-worm that had lodged in his brain, but no such luck. It played on for another two days.

Chapter 6

A Momentary Dip in Hot Water

Monday 13 November

The key turned in the lock and Micklethwaite stepped into old Mrs Rattenbury's office. Sunlight poured in, so Julia was right. It was a nice room. Most of the furniture was gone and the account shelves empty. All that was left was Mrs Rattenbury's desk and the massive chintz decorated chair she occupied like a matronly queen. The desk was piled high with files and file boxes and a large stack of ancient diocese magazines.

He glanced over them. Some of them went back to the 1930's, but they were all ordered by year so it wouldn't be hard to assimilate on the archive shelves. He picked one at random and leafed through old black and white pictures of fetes, and vicars at garden parties, with women in long dresses, big hats and portly gentlemen in tweeds. It was an untroubled, undisturbed, immunised era. Every parish seemed to have its cricket team, and there was no hint here of a world war about to start. He replaced the magazines and then went through the drawers of the desk but they were mostly empty.

One drawer had an old fashioned fountain pen, really old. He hadn't seen one since his school days, and was twirling it between his fingers when it slipped through them onto the floor and rolled under the desk.

'Bugger'.

Micklethwaite fished around the desk and banged his head on the underside, (another 'bugger!') and grabbed the pen and then noticed an envelope stashed discretely between the desk struts. He pulled it out, and emptied the contents on the table.

Not much really, two photocopies and some newspapers clippings. Why did Mrs Rattenbury hide these here? The cathedrals photocopier was ancient and the photocopies he looked at were smudgy, dark, and the photos indistinct, but he recognised the layout style as the Diocese Magazine. These went back yonks, and each month

was bound in a set of four ‘Spring’, ‘Summer’, Autumn’ ‘Winter’. He didn’t have to guess the year for someone had helpfully wrote the date on top in precise lettering ‘p26-27 June 1938’ and again ‘10-11 July 1938’ and he fancied it looked like Mrs Rattenbury’s hand writing.

Why had she saved these? People standing around in some sort of meeting, church news, a local church vandalised, hardly thrillng stuff, but what you would expect from a church magazine. There were also two newspaper clippings from the *Chaucester Gazette*. One was in the 1968 Births, Deaths and Marriages column, and one baby’s death had been circcled in red pencil for some reason. But the second clipping caught his eye immediately. It was from 1962, from the *Chaucester Gazette*. It was a news item of a man arrested near the public toilets for propositioning another man. He was named and fined £20, quite a lot in 1962. He read it carefully and sat back in the winged chintz chair. Oh yes, well that explained a lot. He wondered if Felicity knew…

Speak of the devil so they say, and at that exact moment Felicity knocked and opened the door.

‘Can I interrupt?’ she asked.

Initially Gordon thought Felicity had a stereotypical library persona, but but he had noticed some passion there, and they were quite rapidly becoming accomplices in the archival game.

‘Of course. Julia wanted me to clear away these records, so she gave me the key. You see I’ve fallen into the old trap of reading the archives rather than organising them’.

He quietly tried to push the clippings back into the envelope hoping that Felicity wouldn’t notice. She didn’t seem to and sighed:

‘It really is a beautiful room, I get quite jealous when I see the sun pour in’.

‘Julia says she’s going to move in’.

‘Lucky her. Better than our dungeon Gordon. Now these magazines.’

He warned her.

‘They are heavy, four a year I think and they must go back to the 1920’s. I don’t know what Mrs Rattenbury was doing with them. They arent very exciting’.

Felcity grabbed a pile and carried them to the archive room, which gave Gordon enough time to shove the newspaper clipping back into the folder, and slip the folder back under the desk. It seemed the safest place. Then he picked up a pile of Diocese magazines and followed her into the office.

They were busy shelving them when the bishop came in, followed by Martin Strange. Percy had something of his old bounce back.

‘Hello chaps, look I havn’t had a chance to talk to you Gordon since this

ghastly business happened'.

He mused out loud, then turned to Micklethwaite

'I mean I could have got in the car too. I do hope you will stay on?'

'Julia asked me to sort out the mess on Mrs Rattenbury's desk'.

'Excellent, good woman Julia, one of my guardian angels, and believe me I need them at the moment. Felicity are you well?'

He gave her an affectionate hug.

'Thank you Percy, you mustn't blame yourself.'

'But I do, indeed I do, but Martin here has been a brick to support me'.

He saw a notice on the board.

'Are you organising the next Foul Play Club meeting Martin. He peered at it and took off his glasses 'The Benefits of Murder. What an extraordinary title, but I cannot go. Would be too, what's the word…'

'Distasteful' ventured Micklethwaite.

The Bishop hemmed and hawed.

'Well yes, well no, maybe unsuited to my…'

'To your position Your Grace'.

'Yes exactly! Thank you Martin. A bettter choice of words. Anyway just breezed by and must go and see the Cathedral board now. Take care all of you'.

Micklethwaite locked Mrs Rattenburys door, and returned the key and then saw many other old keys hanging on the wall.

'These keys must open a lot of old doors'

He ventured this opinion to Felicity and she looked up.

'Have you seen our Sulphur Room yet? Our warm baths'

'Baths? No, in a cathedral?'

Then it was Alberts turn to come bustling in at that moment, with a screwdriver in one hand and a hammer in the other. He caught the tale end of the chit-chat.

'Bath isnt the only town with a hot water spring you know' he said. Now, where did you want that hook put in Filly?'

Micklethwaite looked surprised at this revelation.

'Really, hot water?'

Bert just prattled on.

'It's right here under the cathedral, a dungeon, creepy it is, beside the crypt.

The monks used to use it, for washing themselves and their clothes, then it became the Sulphur Room. The bish keeps his grog down there! Old wines and sherries and stuff, bit of a tippler the bish. Philly you should show Gordon. But fill out the swim book. Everyone has to do it these days'.

Albert vigorously banged away at the wall and screwed in the hook. Felicity looked non-plussed.

'Do you want to go there Gordon?'

'I like dungeons'.

She harrumped.

'Ok grab that old key on the right'.

It was the longest and oldest key. Albert chipped in cheekily.

'No skinny dipping mind, against the regulations'.

Felicity looked shocked in her best school marm voice.

'Really Bert'.

Micklethwaite asked.

'Will the Foul Play Club meeting go ahead now? It's Martin Strange next. After Mrs Rattenbury's death, isnt it a bit tactless?'

Bert guffawed.

'Are you saying that Martin Strange is strange? He's a complete weirdo if you ask me'.

'We werent asking you Bert…' chipped in Felicity disaprovingly.

'I'm gonna give my pennys worth though now aint I?'

Albert Pringle left whistling and Micklethwaite observed.

'You know Felicity, everyone seems so much more cheerful now that Mrs Rattenbury is gone.'

Felcity grimaced. She filled out the swim book, and looking over her shoulder Micklethwaite noticed that Felicty went there here a lot. In fact it was mostly Felicity, with some entries from the bishop.

'Violet cast a long shadow. Ready?'

The locked door to the Sulphur Room was right beside the meeting room where they held the Foul Play Club. After turning the key and with with a practiced shove, Felicity opened the door. She flicked on the lighting switch which had a wee note on it 'timing light for ten minutes only'. She carefully closed the door after her and lead the way down the dark steep stone steps, into a large clammy, undergound room. Micklethwaite fancied the Sulphur Room wat least twenty feet below ground. She turned the dial on the bottom light switch fully on which gave them 20 minutes.

The air was moist with a faint whiff of rotten eggs from the warm black water. They were standing on a broad stone shelf overlooking a large pool, maybe wenty feet long, long enough to swim in. You could not see the bottom. There was a loud sound of rushing water, and a channel took excess water from the pond and fed it into a mill race that disappeared into a tunnel. She brought out a torch.

> 'I've been caught out by the light switch going out and its as black as a ace of spades down here. Pretty dangerous'.

She plied her torch over the surface of the water pond.

> 'Its bottomless you know.'

Felicity as she took off her sandals and and hitched up her skirt.

> 'Go on try the water'.

She sat on the ledge and put her feet on another step that was now under the water, and Micklethwaite could see there were a series of submerged steps to the bottom. She dipped her feet into the oily pond. He pulled off his shoes and sox and sat beside her. The pond water was surprising warm, not quite bath water but more than tepid.

> 'There used to be a waterwheel down the mill-race where they ground flour for the cathedral and monks. You can see where the water wheel used to be'.
>
> 'You can't stand up in it the pond" Micklethwaite peered.
>
> 'The water is deep at the moment, all that rain. Usually its only five feet and I can walk around in it. It's quite safe really, except in high water like now, then the water surges into into mill race.'

Micklethwaite looked at it thoughtfully

> 'Its roaring now'.

The current was strong, as a few leaves got rapidly sucked into the wash and hurtled down the mill race to their doom;.

> 'Where does the water go?'

He had to raise his voice above the sound

> 'It goes through a tunnel into the Chaucester River. The leaves get caught up in the grill so they have to clear it out now and then. One of Berts men does that'.

Felicity swang her legs back anf forth, swirling the leaves about.

> 'I mean its not Costa del Sol but very nice for the odd dip. They say its good for rheumataism and such like. Well, I can't vouch for that. I've always been disgustingly healthy'.
>
> 'You come down quite a bit, judging from the swim book'.
>
> 'You notice things don't you? It's nice in the water, warm, meditative. A

good place in winter, and to escape the rat race although the rats get down here sometimes'.

He chided her.

'You are the most unlikely person to live in the rat race Felicity'.

They puddled their feet in silence in the oily water as the excess poured into the mill-race. It was a long pause and the intensity of the subterranean room heightened their nearness. Felicity spoke first.

'I should tell you what happened here. Something ghastly'.

'You see a girl, a young girl, only seventeen came down for a swim, and got swept out of the pound, into the rushing race under the waterwheel and ended up against grill where the race discharges into the river. There's a cover they use to trap the washing I suppose. The front door wasn't locked then, and anyone could come down the steps, it was horrible. Her body got pretty mangled when they lifted her out. Twenty years ago. Now only church staff are allowed down into the Sulphur Room and they must sign the 'Swim Book'.

Micklethwaite absorbed this tragedy.

'There's some candle stubs there so it could be romantic with the right person'.

'I'm assuming that's not a proposition Gordon. I have my standards you know. Are you married?'

'No. Are you?'

'No. I'm happy being a spinster'.

This conversation did have an oddly romantic quirk to it so Micklethwaite quickly changed the topic.

'I see the bishop comes down here for a swim as well quite a lot'.

She giggled.

'He doesn't come for swimming. Have you looked in the cupboard yet?'

There was a large oak cipboard set against the wall, and after Micklethwaite hauled himself out of the water he opened it gingerly. It was full of bottles, and not empty either. Seventy or so bottles, some caked with dust. Micklethwaite knew nothing about wine but one label had French lettering with the year 1926. He didn't dare touch it. He looked at her.

'It's the bishops wine cellar'.

'Was 1926 a good year?' he indicated the bottle to Felicity.

'I wouldn't know. He keeps these bottles mostly to himself. Sometimes at Christmas I've had a drink or two. There's some elegant glasses there.'

‘He comes down for a quiet tipple eh? I suppose a bishop should drink out of sight of his parishioners?”

‘Exactly’.

She got out a towel she brought and dried her feet. Micklethwaite had not remembered to bring such an item, so she passed hers over.

‘You were never tempted to marry Felicity?”

‘That’s a personal question Gordon isn’t it? Or is it? Well I will tell you a story about that’.

‘Julia talked to me once, opened right out. I don’t why she choose me, I think she was a bit drunk. She asked me why I’d never married and I said well the opportunity didn’t come up. Then I asked why she hadn’t married and she said she nearly had, twice. She dropped her first fiancee in favour of another man, but the other man dumped her for a younger women. That other man was the bishop’.

In the sombre light Micklethwaite kept the surprise out of his face.

‘She said she was desperately hurt, I mean she was 29 and had been going out with him for three years, waiting for three years, she was ready for a child ‘.

He thought aloud.

‘So she must have a real grievance there then. She would have made a good wife for a bishop’.

‘Hmmmm. Well she’s efficient and gets things done, and young enough to have children, but anyway Percy had other ideas. He always has too many bright ideas. The story goes is that she got the post of Archdeacon because the bishop felt guilty for dumping her, but I think she got the job on pure talent alone’.

She closed the cupboard door behind them, and they walked up the stairs and flicked the timer switch off. In the cloisters Micklethwaite remarked out loud.

‘Who would have guessed…’

‘Guessed what?’

‘That so much happens under the stonework of a cathedral’.

Chapter 7

An Intimate Inspection of an Upright Post

Wednesday 15 November

It was a grey unappealing day with an offshore wind cutting across the lank grass on the headlands. There were not many walkers about, so after carefully looking around, Micklethwaite stood by the red tape that isolated the carpark and took some photos. Luckily the carpark hadn't been disturbed yet, as the police were awaiting the coroners report. He was looking straight down the line of where he surposed the car had slid and tumbled. The wooden rail had gone and the police had put up more tape in a rather feeble effort to prevent anyone getting too close, but Micklethwaite was determined to do just that.

It was Wednesday before he could get back to the Beacons Lookout. Yesterday they'd been busy sorting out files and working out some some sort of system, and Felicity seemed energised, and starting labelling the shelves, drawing up a register of records, and bustled about with a brush and pan, sending dust scattering. They teased each other.

> 'We really need a computer. Put the archive records on it. Make searching much easier'.
>
> 'Fat chance there Gordon, but talk to Julia. She's the boss of the purse strings now.'
>
> 'Ok'.
>
> 'You don't like my system of brushing the dust of the files every ten years?'
>
> 'I suppose it keeps you fit'.
>
> 'Your turn tomorrow. Wednesday is my day off'.

At the Beacons carpark Mickletwaite glanced around nervously, then slithered under the tape, and quickly spotted the red stones again. With the tape measure he measured the distance between the two lines of stones, about three metres. The lines were incomplete, and probably heavy police feet had kicked away some of the red

stones, but they were distinct once you knew they were there. He took photos of the pattern.

At the cliff edge he peered over the tape. Quite a leap, so no surviving that, then looked carefully at the posts. The rail had disappeared over the the cliff with the Bently, but the two squat posts remained. They were about three feet high, concreted into the ground, and pretty solid. The bolts were drilled right through the posts with a rusted nut on the landward side. They were well bedded in but he noticed that there was only one bolt one for each post. That was pretty slack workmanship.

He heard a noise. Damn, someone was coming, and he quickly walked back to the tape. A man was with his dog, a different man from last time, who looked at him supiciously. Sometimes boldness was the best policy.

> 'I took some photos of the scene. The bishop asked me to take a record in case there was a court case'.

The man nodded, and did not seem that interested.

> 'Oh, yeah well. I suppose there might be'.
>
> 'The police have said it's an accident but the bishop is really upset. Can't forgive himself.'
>
> 'I guess he could pray for forgiveness'.

This was an unexpected and rude reply, and then the man walked off. Micklethwaite looked after him and said out loud to himself.

> 'Obviously not an Anglican'.

As the man disappeared along the track Micklethwaite went back for a second look at the posts, and peered at the broken bolts. He was not happy with their appearance. They seemed to have a shiny surface, with a small tuft of metal left on one side as if they'd been hacksawed. He took some close-up photos, and visually lined up the posts with the red stones. If the Bently had rolled a few feet either side it would have hit the posts and they probably would have stopped the car. It would take a precise calculation to find the gap, which might explain the red stones.

Surely the bishop couldn't have done it? That seemed too improbable; he would have died himself. Or maybe the handbrake was never set on. The Bently just had to be lined up, which would mean all the bishop had to do was shove the car, but hold on, he liked Percy, and found it ridiculous to see him as a cold blooded and calculated murderer. After all the bishop could have simply forgotten to pull the handbrake up.

As he walked back along the cliff Micklethwaite was speculating the reality of a perfect murder. Maybe it was all just a coincidence, a bizarre accident, and perhaps he was overthinking it. Or, maybe it was the other way round, and it wasn't Mrs Rattenbury someone was trying to kill, but the bishop. Mrs Rattenbury was merely collateral damage. The archdeacon had an agrieved love affair, and the red pebbles came from her pathway — a vengeance killing?

Back at the archive office Micklethwaite was cold and the room was like a refrigera-

tor. Felicity was away, so the heating was turned off. Now where were those magazines? Oh yes, Felicity had stacked them tidily on the shelf now labelled Diocese magazines. He found 1937 and 1939 but no 1938. Probably Mrs Rattenbury had taken them home. He needed a full set.

He got the key to Mrs Rattenbury's office and retrieved the envelope from under the desk and photocopied the photocopies and newspaper clippings as best as he could, but it made the photos even more murky. Then he returned the original photocopies back into the envelope, and into their hiding place under the desk, but he wasn't sure why he had done that. Mrs Rattenbury would hardly be returning to collect her stuff again, so perhaps he was just being tidy?

In the cold room, getting dark with the winter light, he spent some time reading the photocopied pages, but for the life of him he could see nothing sinister in it. Unless the Anglican new youth movement in 1938 counted as anything much. There was talk of fund raising and a march past next week. One photo showed a group of young men standing proudly with a flag that seemed to have a lightning bolt on it.

His fingers drummed on the table. He did not think well in cold weather. A line of red stones, hacksawed bolts, and no copies of the 1938 Diocesan magazine. Mrs Rattenbury kept the *Chaucester Gazette* snippet and presumably there was some hidden meaning in those 1938 photocopies, and she had gone to some trouble to hide them. But nothing much gelled in his mind. He sighed, time to go home. He turned off the light, which left the archive room looking more gloomy than ever and the stacks of files and books felt more like a tomb than a library.

He remembered a story he had read about blackmailers, that once they get a taste for the lifestyle they keep searching for new victims, new blood. It's an addiction, and can be profitable, but what drives them is actually the power they have over another human being. Especially if they themselves feel side-lined or unimportant, or overlooked, and he fancied Mrs Rattenbury did feel these things. What was she up to?

Chapter 8

An Unexpected Gap in the Record

Friday 17 November

There was Christmas tinsel in the shops and the photographic studio was playing Christmas carols, but how that helped sales Micklethwaite couldn't imagine. He dropped his film off and escaped as quickly as possible,

'Should be next week Mr Micklethwaite'.

Jingle bells was being played in the supermarket where he got his milk, and several shops had sprayed fake snow in their windows, although ironically, a bad storm was predicted that could bring the real stuff to Chaucester soon.

'Christmas gets earlier every bloody year'.

Bert Pringle grumbled, and for once Micklethwaite heartedly agreed with him.

That morning it was his turn to tackle the dreaded microfiche machine which Felicity told him she hated. They only had one, posistioned in the darkness corner of the archive room, as if Felicity was determined to condemn it to eternal neglect. Micklethwaite had to brush off the dust. It hadn't been used for at least a year.

Micro-fiches were supposedly a modern system, where files were photographed. minitarised and put on a film slide, so a whole book could be squeezed onto a playing card piece of film. The reader was a clunky machine with a powerful light and lense, that enabled the film to be viewed at full size. It was awkward and unsexy, and manouevering the film so it could be viewed was an art form.

The index system was a series of brown cards in brown drawers, and it took some time to locate the Diocese magazines. But here was the 1930's and Mickethwaite slipped in the film sheet and manouevered it under the view finder. He had used micro-fiches in New Zealand and understood some of their quirks, but when he got to the 1930s 1938 was missing. There were just white spaces. He zoomed back and forth. Here was 1939, and 1937 but no 1938. Weird.

Finally he pulled out the film sheet and peered at it under the desklamp. 1938 had

been neatly cut out, with scissors probably. Clearly not an accident anyway, but definitely someone had a problem with 1938 Diocese magazine. He read through the 1939 magazine and and again found nothing obviously untoward. Hints of war here and there but still, remarkable placid as if everything would go as normal. In fact 'business as usual' was the catchphrase that cropped up several times.

He leaned back on the chair. and scratched his head. Then called out

'Felicity? Have a look at this'.

She came over and reluctantly peered through the viewer. Then he showed her the actual film, held up to the light.

'You see? 1938 has been cut out. Who would do that?'

'What's so special about 1938?' she asked.

'Oh, not much really, but my mother was married then and she told me there was a photo in the magazine of her wedding'.

That was a barefaced lie, but he needed a pretext.

'Maybe Percy has a set of the Diocese Magazines, or Julia' she suggested.

Micklethwaite shrugged, turned off the micro-fiche machine, re-indexed the film and they walked over to the tea corner where the zip machine was boiling the water.

'Or Martin?'

'God no, he has his mind on other things'.

'Spiritual stuff'.

She made the tea.

'Not always spiritual. You know he tried to chat me up a few days ago.'

'Martin, the Bishops chaplain?'

'You sound surprised?.

'Well, I thought he was married…' Micklethwaite said lamely.

'And why would he waste his time with a shrivelled old maid like me?'

'I didn't say that!' he protested 'still it's a good point'.

He got a sharp kick on the shin for that remark.

'Ow'.

'You thought it though, so did I. His chat up line was rather curious. He gave me a Bible in a pink ribbon'

'A bible, really? You must have plenty already.'

'Ah yes, but he opened the bible at a passage he had personally underlined. It was from the Old Testament I think. I can't remember the exact passage but it was something like 'to every man should belong a wife, and to every

woman a child'.

Gordon was bemused.

'Did you go out with him?'

'No, of course not. I said I was too old for that sort of nonsense'.

Bert Pringle came in at lunchtime and as they chatted Gordon asked him if knew of anyone who had a set of the Diocese Magazines.

'Not my line Jordan, but I will tell you what. Go and see Nick Rodgers around the corner in St Michaels church. He's probably got a set. Hop, skip and a jump away'.

The parish church of St Michael was where Mrs Rattenbury had had her funeral, and it was literally just around the corner from the cathedral. Why the church was so close to a cathedral was a mystery to Micklethwaite. He said this to Felicity.

'I might go round this afternoon, do you want to come for a stroll?"

She was reluctant, but just as he was putting on his coat she had a change of mind and joined him.

'Fresh air will be good I guess. I spend too long in this room'.

The Reverend Nicholas Rodgers was delighted to see them, but immediately shook his head.

'No I'm sorry Felicity my dear, we don't have records here. They are all kept in the archives. You don't have them either? Tut tut, never mind… look here, this pew was made by your father. A clever man with his hands, turn himself to any skill. I think he maintained my car for thirty years.'

And then they were quickly being given a guided tour of the new Chancel Screen, which had been donated by a wealthy parishioner. They nodded in appreciation but by now were keen to leave. They had gravitated to the vicarage next door, then, just as they were making their necessary polite goodbyes, the reverend came up with an inspired idea.

'I have it! You know where there is a set of the magazines you want, I've just remembered! In my old church, St Peter of the Poor'.

'But that's on military land' protested Felicity.

This interested Micklethwaite. He had heard that the army had seized a few villages like this before the war. The Reverend explained.

'Well you see, after 1940, the army wanted the coastline, and they took over the parish of St Peters church, and turned out the few people living there in the village of Cropworth, lock stock and barrel. Everyone had to leave, and pretty much everything was left *in situ*. Very overgrown now, but I did hear from a colonel chum of mine that the church was largely untouched, even today'.

‘But why didn’t they return the church and the village after the war?’ asked Micklethwaite.

Reverend Rodgers look perplexed.

‘I’m not really sure, perhaps we didn’t ask for them back. But all the records are there. In the sacristy’.

He pointed to a wall in the vicarage which showed an aerial photo view of St Peters of the Poor.

‘You know I think the army gave me this, it’s a nice view isnt it? I worry about my little church. There’s been vandalim you know, smashed windows, oh dear. Oh, you asked about the sacristy, there it is on the side of the church. That’s where the archives were kept, including the diocese magazines and spare bibles and all the records of the parish in fact, quite a collection really. There’s a door between the two…’

‘Locked?’

‘No, no, I don’t think so. You see this little walled garden here, right beside the sacristy. That’s where I grew my vegetables and some of the best tomatoes ever, the sun warmed the walls so well. Theres a side door from the sacristy to the garden and I used to sneak outside sometimes and water the tomatoes if no one showed up for the service…’

‘Goodness, did that happen often?’ asked Felicity

‘Oh occasionally, you know it was 1939 and people were so pre-occupied by the war. Many villagers had left Cropworth already. The army said they would give it back, but you know they never have’.

He looked rather sad at that point. Then he opened a door in an impressive writing desk.

‘Oh I forgot, here is the key to the front door. We went there two years ago, Martin and I, so the door might not work. It might need a good hefty shove’.

Micklethwaite weighed the key in his hand and admired it. It was almost a foot long and not something you would keep in your pocket. They chatted for a few more minutes and Felicity could see the old man was getting tired. He rambled on about his little garden again and what a joy it was and Micklethwaite had really stopped listening, but not quite, and it was fortunate for him that the vicar had told them about the vegetable garden; he remembered later that that tiny detail had saved his life.

Felicity went home, and Micklethwaite promised to lock the archive office. He did a bit of tidying up, and stared at the microfiche macchine solemnly for a while, as if trying to inspire the beast to give up its secrets. Perhaps he should grab those photocopies Mrs Rattembury had hidden in her desk. He got the key from the wall, and found the room quite full with new shelving and chairs, and even pictures on the wall. The Archdeacon was busy moving in. The chintz armchair had been relegated to a corner.

He crawled under the desk and felt around underneath but couldn't find the envelope. He was so surprised he banged his head on the desk struts. He searched quite a bit around the desk, under the drawers, in the drawers, but no. The envelope had vanished.

He sat in the chintz amchair and pondered this development. It was lucky he still had photocopies of the documents, but he had told no one of the existence of the envelope so who could have taken it? Felicity, did she spot it that day? But he had only found the envelope on the 13 November and the envelope was still there on the 15 when he came back from the Beacons carpark. That was two days ago. Even Martin Strange might have been in the room, for he was always snooping around in his lovelorn manner, but what about the bishop? But he dismissed this idea as ludicrous.

Julia Graham? She had been tidying up the room, and had removed a lot of files. He had seen her yesterday moving some of her stuff and furniture in, and although the desk didn't appear to have been moved perhaps it had, and the envelope simply slipped onto the floor. Let's face it, the key to Mrs Rattenbury's old room was available to anyone really. But still someone really did not like the 1938 Diocese Magazine. Odd. Gone from the archives, cut out from the micro-fiche, and these photocopies disappeared…

He felt someone was watching him, someone knew what he was up to, and further more he got the feeling that someone did not like it.

Chapter 9

The Immediate Benefit of a Murder

Monday 20 November

Micklethwaite wasn't going to go to the Foul Play Club tonight, but he was intriqued that the zealot Martin Strange was interested in murder. Someone so religious, although on second thoughts you could consider the cruxification as a sort of murder, which put a strange quirk on Christian belief. There were only six people present for the Foul Play Club, and of course the bishop was absent.

Martin Strange began his little talk by gazing upwards for inspiration, then coughed, and rubbed his finger up and down his nose as if it irritated him, which perhaps it did. It was a nervous habit and he did it several times every minute during his short talk, which was distracting, but after a while Micklethwaite looked down at his feet and began to focus on what the chaplain was saying rather than his strange gesticulations, and this turned out to be interesting.

> 'I suppose it seems callous and cruel to consider the benefit of a murder but clearly that's what the murderer considered. No one really commits a murder without considering what is (as they say it colloquially) in it for them. Police and murder lovers like us often focus on the larger motive and especially money, as the rationale for the crime but I am going to suggest in this little presentation that in fact we should be looking at the immediate benefit, in fact the little motives. What is the immediate benefit for the murder of the murder?'

He stood in a way that resembled a pulpit position, with one arm raised as if to strike home a point.

> 'There may be multiple reasons for a husband to kill his wife but often the most pressing one will be of an immediate benefit to him. I mean a husband might kill a wife not because of the insurance money, or because he has a mistress, or wants to run away with another women, but perhaps to stop the nagging. Perhaps he just wants peace and quiet and the house to himself? A relief from a tedious situation?'
>
> 'A businessman might kill a rival partner not solely because he would at-

tain the entire business but because he was sick of the constant discussions or bickering. The money may not be the motive in the first place, it might simply be a trivial and childish impulse to do things his way. To be his own master shall we say'.

'Let us consider the following…'

Martin rambled on, coughing and rubbing his nose, and gave other examples but Micklethwaite had stopped listening. In spite of himself the bishops chaplains talk was more helpful to Micklethwaite than he first realised, for he'd been looking at it the wrong way. He never thought about dividing the motives of a murderer into two halves: the immediate benefit and the latent benefit, but it made sense.

Who really benefitted immediately from Mrs Violet Rattenburys death? The people around her, who had to put up with her carping criticism and acid manners. A difficult woman, and wouldn't life be so peaceful without her? Micklethwaite had noted that there was a pronounced cheerfulness in the Cathedral offices after Mrs Rattenbury's death. and not one person, not even the bishop, had explicitedly stated that Mrs Rattenbury would be missed. Because she wouldn't be. It was good riddance. And someone had tried to poison the woman with that cake, or at least make her very ill.

And what about the Bishops young boozy wife? Was her sudden death an accident, or a murder? She was an embarassment, no doubt about that, and even a bit of a disgrace if she was seeing other young men. The bishop was the logical killer, but he couldn't quite see Percy doing it unless he had help. And anyway Percy was in SouthA frica, but what if he had out-sourced the murder to someone else, a sort of guardian angel? But the cathedral staff might have been equally upset by this floozy, and what did Martin Strange make of her? Was she a sinner in his eyes? Was it affecting the refutation of the Cathedral itself?

Suddenly Micklethwaite realised that Martin had finished his talk and there was a short applause, and shuffling of chairs as the rest of the audience disappeared quite quickly, leaving Micklethwaite and Strange alone. Strange tidied up the tea things and Gordon decided not to waste his chance.

'I enjoyed your talk. You made a good point. I mean motives are hard to pin down'.

Martin nodded in a grave manner, and started to wipe the table. Micklethwaite tried again and got a real surprise.

'The bishop must be awfully distressed by this whole affair'.

'Transfixed, almost paralysed, as he watched the car tumble over the cliff'.

Micklethwaite was puzzled.

'You were there? You saw the whole thing?'

'Why yes, I thought you knew. I was walking above the carpark when I saw the Bishop's car, and you know it was often his habit to take Mrs Rattenbury

on these little escapes. I did not interfere until I saw the car go over the lip, and saw the poor bishop frozen in place. Poor man, he was just taking the picnic things out of the back of the Bently….'

'The boot was up?'

'Well I rushed down to the carpark, and comforted him as best I could. His Grace was standing pertrified on the edge. I believe he might have jumped himself, to follow Mrs Rattenbury but I restrained the His Grace. It was fortunate that I was present'.

Martin Strange gazed up at heaven and rubbed the side of his nose as if thinking

'Yes indeed, perhaps His Grace triggered the movement of the Bently, yes that was it. The bishop is a corpulent man, his weight, physics, do I need to explain… Yes poor Mrs Rattenbury, thrust into the abyss, except of course her destination was a place of paradise. The bishop was horrified, scarcely sensible, I do not blame him, and God would not blame him.'

Micklethwaite could barely understand the coincidence that the bishops chaplain and the bishop were both at Beacons Lookout at the same time, and he said so. Strange mused.

'I often go up to the Beacons Lookout to commune and meditate. I like howlng winds, the fury of the tempest — don't you agree? It is even better at night. Full solitude, just the stars and baleful moon. Then a man can feel close to God'.

Once again his head went skywards as if God in person was listening. Micklethwaite tried to get Strange down to earth, away from these mystical revelations.

'It must have been gruesome.' ventured Micklethwaite.

'Sad, very sad. I rushed to comfort His Grace of course, and then ran down to the foot of the cliffs to see the car wreck. Nothing could be done, but I spoke a prayer over Mrs Rattenbury's soul. Everyone needs our prayers.'

There was an awkward pause as they both considered the fate of Mrs Rattenbury, smeared into raspberry pulp at the foot of the cliff. He had to try and break through the chaplains defences.

'Have you ever wanted to commit murder Martin?'

He seemed surprisingly unshocked by this rude question.

'Strange things are nurtured in so many bosoms, but no!'

'But for your faith? For Christ?'

'Well, if I am called upon to serve a higher Lord, but I would seek a more moderate path, a persuading path, like Jesus'.

He did not seem perturbed by the question and once again the finger rubbed along the nose and the head tilted skywards.

‘You see, I’m appointed by my faith as sort of guardian angel for people, I watch over them. Like the bishop for example.’

‘You admire the bishop?’

‘Of course’ Strange seemed surprised by the question ‘a great and good man, and I would do anything it takes to help him in his ministry’.

Micklethwaite was not sure that he wanted Martin Strange watching over him. The chaplains awkward body shape, smileless lips and strange religious verbiage felt more akin to an angel of death. They walked to the door together.

‘You are achieving matters in the archives? ‘ asked Strange

‘Well yes, though it’s three steps forward two steps back sort of thing..’

‘I don’t understand’.

‘Well some records are missing of course, so it would be good to plug the gaps. Felicity is very helpful’.

‘Ahhh, a splendid woman!’

Strange became animated.

‘She needs a mate don’t you think? Everyone needs a mate’.

Gordon was at loss to come up with of any sort of reply and filled the awkward space with unecessary information.

‘Errr, well maybe, we are thinking of going to the old church of St Peter of the Poor on Wednesday, to look up the records they may have… Well, thanks for your talk’.

Strange called him back.

‘Is that the church on army land? They took the whole village as well. I went to the church last year with Reverend Rodgers, most uncanny, and the wee church so neglected. They say the area is full of undetonated ammunition and such like, mines even, so I cannot recommend it’.

‘You didn’t get blown up?’

‘God protected me’.

‘Well, we have the key from the Reverend, and he says it should be fine if we go in late afternoon’.

‘Ahh, Mr Nicholas Rogers, a man of the old fervent school. Delightful, and very religious too’.

That was high praise from Mr Strange, who was freakishly religious himself. Gordon tried his escape again.

‘Well, thanks for your talk, I’d better go’

‘Indeed you should go. Remember I am always ready for your soul’.

Micklethwaite walked away wondering if he had a soul, and whether Martin Strange was the man to tend to it. I suppose he could do worse, and what did Martin Strange mean he would do *anything* to protect the bishop?

Chapter 10

Down Among the Dead Men

Tuesday 21 November

Micklethwaite had been seeing a lot more of the bishop lately, especially since the archdeacon had shifted her office next door. Percy and Julia were often having conflabs about the Cathedral Restoration Fund Raising, which was going very well, and the bishops chaplain Martin Strange had also been visiting the archive office a lot, much to Felicitys annoyance.

> 'I told him I wasn't interested. Can't he see the obvious?'

Percy had regained a lot of his jovial manner, and was very enthused that the Restoration had received a boost lately from a European Union Grant. He came in one day with an big smile on his rotund face and swallowed Gordon up in huge friendly smile.

> 'I must say Gordon, these European Union chaps have lots of money. Try getting a million or so out of the British Government eh? What about a celebration? You know about my secret cupboard in the Sulphur Room. Felicity has told you I'm sure. What about a celebratory tipple? Where is she?"
>
> 'Felicity is out Your Grace'.

Micklethwaite could not quite bring himself to say Percy yet.

> 'Never mind, let's go down eh? You and me for a chinwag'.

The Bishop grabbed the key and they walked over to the cloisters to the Sulphur Room. The bishop flicked on the timing switch, and went cautiously down the slimy steps and opened the wine cupboard with a satisfied air.

> 'I don't make a habit of this Gordon, but a million euros eh?! That is something to celebrate. There's some very fine Madeira here, fifty years old. It keeps well'.

So it was at 11 am in the morning on a Tuesday, that in the cool and humid gloom of the Sulphur Room, with the water rushing out, and under one single lightbulb, that Gordon found himself sipping a sherry with His Grace the Bishop of Chaucester, Percival Somerville.

‘Cheers my boy. Good to have you on the team’.

They clinked glasses.

‘Some of these wines are over eighty years old, older than me by Jove, and keeping better!’

The bishop roared at his own joke as he gave Gordon a tour of the wine cupboard.

‘That’s a Jerez 1946 I think, and this one is a Marsala from 1908. These two French wines are both last century you know. Yes it’s a weakness I know, down among the dead men. Did you know they stored the deceased down here, in the crypt, in coffins I hope otherwise they would have smelt a bit eh?’

The bishop was in an extraordinary good mood, so Micklethwaite took the plunge.

‘I was talking to Martin Strange, your chaplain, and he said he was at the cliff carpark when the car went over’.

The bishop shook his head in bewilderment.

‘Extraordinary piece of luck, that I mean would I might jumped myself, or fallen, if Martin hadn’t grabbed me. Just impelled to follow poor Violet to her death’.

He sat down on the chair.

‘I have to tell you Gordon tha it has been stressful dealing with Violets death, I go over and over it in my mind. Should never have happened. Martin was a great support’.

‘You still hope to be archbishop?”

‘No chance, no chance, or so I thought, I was going to withdraw my nomination, but the Cathedral members talked to me, insisted I should keep standing. Julia persuaded me to think again. People have stood by me, all my guardian angels eh? And then the Bishop of Leeds rang me, my main rival, and absolutely told me I should keep my application in’.

The bishop dropped his voice to a whisper. The first glass of sherry had been quickly followd by another.

‘But you know what decided me. The Prime Minister of England rang me, and positively insisted I should keep my hat in the ring. I mean that is a hint isn’t Gordon?’

Percy laughed and his roar was louder than the water race. He packed away the glasses and shut the cupboard door.

‘You know Gordon, there are bad people out there sadly, people who do you harm even when you have done them no harm. I pray for their souls, but you have to remember that for every bad person there are ten, twenty kind people. People who will help you, especially in your dark hours’.

He turned the light timer to give them enough time to walk up the dimly lit stairs to the door. Percy locked the door and handed the key back to Gordon. The cloister seemed quite bright in comparison to the dark room below.

'Take that back please Gordon, ahh Mrs Halliwell'.

A well dressed woman of perhaps fifty was walking down the cloister corridor towards them. She smiled and greeted him warmly.

'Percy! So pleased to see you. I was looking for you in the offices. Dreadful business, but you are feeling better?'

'Why yes Amy, I've got my pecker up'.

The Bishop gave Mrs Halliwell a friendly squeeze, and she laughed, a too loud laugh that echoed off the stonework

'Pleased to hear it Percy, mind you, you always have got it up havent you?'

He roared at her quip and the two of them walked away very amiably, completely forgetting about Micklethwaite standing there. He watched them walk out of sight then returned to the archive room and hung up the key. He vaguely remembered that a 'pecker' was a slang word for penis.

Chapter 11

Fire in the Sacristy

Wednesday 22 November

He was surprised when Felicity said yes. She raised objections of course, weren't their unexploded mines on the ground? He pointed out that the Reverend Rodgers and Martin Strange had been there two years before, and they didn't get blown up. Also the public road was only a short way from the church. A bridle crossed through a wood to the church, and it was only 300 yards away from the road.

'Did it have to be at night?' she pleaded.

'We have torches and it's just that we are less likely to be disturbed that way. And no one will recognise us in the dark. Who else is going to be out on a winters night? Even the dog walkers will be home by then. I mean it should not take more than 15-20 minutes to walk to the church, open the door, get into the sacristy, and vroom'.

'Vroom?'

'Speedy exit!'

She sighed and agreed, though she looked rather unsure. And she didn't look any happier when they drove up narrow lane in her car, turned around and found a tiny parking bay opposite the woodland track. Micklethwaite checked his ordinanace survey map. There was a gate and an old shabby sign saying St Peters of the Poor.

'By the way your car stinks of petrol'.

'The petrol cap needs replacing. It's loose'.

He looked at her.

'Why don't you stay here? Keep a look out. I will be twenty minutes at most.

Micklethwaite was hoping she would agree to this as having a nervous nelly behind him on this little escapade might prove annoying. She nodded.

'Ok. You will be alright?' .

She looked slightly forlorn, and made a weak joke.

'It's a long way from sorting out files isnt it?'

'More fun though, turn the radio on, check your watch. Give me 30 minutes then come and look for me'.

He got out of the car, turned on his torch and unlatched the gate. The wood quickly absorbed him. He scanned the ground in front of him with the torch and immededi-ately realised that the track was reasonably well worn, and clearly local people and sight-seers had made this little pilgrimage to the forgotten church. It was a sort of hollowway that they get in Dorset, a track worn down through the subsoil so as to appear underground, and in the dark the trees formed a latticed roof that blocked out any light at all.

He counted his paces and after 280 steps the woodland opened up and there was the small church of St Peters of the Poor. He swung his torch around the clearing and up to the roofline but it was all silent. A rustle on his left might have been a ghoul, or goblin but it was more likely a badger.

He extracted the enormous key and fumbled it into the door. If the reverend hadn't been here recently, he might have distrusted that the lock would work. But it turned but the doot didn't budge.

'You have to give it a good shove' advised reverend Rodgers. 'Martin did that bit for me'.

So Micklethwaite did, and the door unstuck itself from the woodwork and creaked open. He was in.

The church was over six hundred years old and he was surprised it wasn't full of cobwebs, which would have freaked him out. He heard a skittering sound which he assumed was mice, although what they could find to eat he couldn't imagaine. The pews hadnt been sat in for forty years and he could feel the dust on them. The altar had a very old flower arrangement, with the stalks bare and the flowers fallen in a quaint wasted circle about the vase.

As Reverend Rodgers had told him there was a side-door to the sacristy, and the handle was an old iron ring. For a few moments Micklethwaite couldn't turn it, and he wondered if the door was locked. Then he tried the other way and the latch lifted up. The sacristy was tiny and full of shelves and books, bibles, surplices hanging down and other ecceliastical equipment that he could not guess its purpose.

Scanning the shelves with his torch he didn't immediately find the Diocese Maga-zines. He found himself breathing faster and told himself to slow down, slow down. It had only taken eight minutes to get into the sacristy so he could afford the time. Now where were they? He hoped the old boy was right.

Here! He recognised the tan bindings of the Diocese Magazine and rubbed away the dust from the spines, 1936, 1937, 1938! Got it. He felt like a pirate captain

on a successful a treasure hunt, and he slipped the volume into his backpack, and glanced around the sacristy before latching the door. Micklethwaite felt very pleased with himself, and shone his torch around the walls of the church and up along the simple paned windows. NO stained glass windows, nothing fancy for St Peters of the Poor.

He stopped, listening, was that a noise outside?

With a blast of fire a bottle smashed through one of the panes of glass and landed on the floor almost at his feet, and then a second bottle came through at the front door. The heat and stink of petrol overhelmed him, and his initial attempt to get to the front door was beaten back by the exploding petrol. He shielded his eyes from the flames which were igniting the pews and rushed back to the altar, and then a third bottle of petrol came through a window and landed almost on him. He fund it hard to breathe, and the tiny interior of the church was furiously burning.

He bent low under the smoke rushed over to the sacristy door and struggled with latch, forgetting which way to twist it, then got it open and slammed it behind him. The old church was bone dry and crackling with fires and smoke started oozing into the sacristy. A rafter crashed down in the church. Even through the door he could can feel the heat.

It was hell. Someone was out to get him, and although he had never seen or heard a molotov cocktail before, he knew that's what they were. He was trapped. Think Gordon think! What had the Reverend said? His little garden, wasn't there a door from the sacristy to the outside? There it was but the bolt was jammed against the shackle and despite throwing his weight against it wouldn't shift. So Micklethwaite grabbed a heavy bible and used it like a hammer, and started to bash the bolt to get it to move.

Flames had started to creep around the sacristy door and the heat was oppressive, This door had to open! Finally, desperately, he whacked the bolt hard with the good book and got it to shift a little, then bit by bit it moved right across. But the door was hard stuck as well, but with a huge brutal and desperate lunge he got it open a foot, and wriggled through the gap.

He was now in the Reverends vegetable garden, now a woodland of weeds and vines and an old plum tree, and it was surrounded by a high stone wall. The plum tree was his escape route and scrabbling up through thorny branches he heaved himself onto the top of the wall and saw the amazing sight of St Peters of the Poor church roaring with flames through every window.

He jumped, and tumbled around in the woodland getting scratched and torn but at least alive. At the clearing he had a few seconds to witness the church which still stood firm against the flames, but not for long. He ran, hard down the holloway. Somewhere he had lost his torch and the holloway was eerily lit by the flames, and then he collided full on with another human being. They tumbled in a melee on the ground, and Micklethwaite in a surge of adrenaline had grabbed the throat of the other person and was just about to throttle him (a man who he reasonably supposed had been trying to kill him) when a voice gasped out.

‘Gordon, Gordon its me’.

“Felicity! Come on lets go!’

He grabbed her hand and hauled her up on her legs.

‘The church is on fire’ she stated obviously

Yeah, lets go’.

He dragged her back to the road, and they bundled into the car. He spoke hoarsely

‘Someone was trying to kill me in there. Start the engine’.

She nervously stalled te car, then started it again. She gasped out.

‘I saw someone, a man running away. I heard a noise and smelt smoke, oh Gordon I got so worried and came to look for you...’

They were both breathing deeply but Mickletwahite hadn’t lost his presence of mind as they drove down the lane.

‘Turn into this road here, see that layby, park here. Did you see the man?’

‘’It was dark, and he was big, I think, but running hard.’

‘Martin?’

‘I don’t know. What happened in there?’

‘Shh, there’s a police coming’.

They could see the red and blue lights on, getting closer to them.

‘Ok just do as I do. Don’t argue’.

As the police car roared up Gordon grabbed Felicity’s face and gave her a passionate kiss, and kept kissing her as the headlights from the police car illuminated them in a garish spotlight. The police car jerked to a stop and the window came down.

‘Oi, come on you two love birds, can’t you see the fire?’

Felicity broke off stammered, and scared.

‘Oh no, sorry’.

The policemens torch played over her face.

‘Corrr, fine time for a romance eh? Come on, clear out of it!’ You didn’t see anyone?

‘No…’

‘Bugger off then’ he said amiably ‘I don’t want to see you two again’.

The police car roared on down the road towards the church and Felicity graunched the gears as they drove off. The other policeman commented to his mate.

'You should have held them sarge?'

'Nah. I recognised her, Felicity Givens that was. Works for the bishop, must be near fifty and snogging a toy boy. Who believe it eh?'

Chapter 12

Interlude with Two Bodies

Wednesday 22 November

The council must have scrimped on streetlighting because the lanes all seemed dim and blurred with river mist, which in daylight might have made the predominantly sixteenth century cottages of Cathedral Close look charming, but tonight they looked grim and Jack the Ripperish thought Gossworth. Felicity turned down stopped halfway along the cottages at outside a bright red door. The streetlights shone a pale neon on their faces, and Micklethwaite could see she had been crying . He reached out to her and gave her a hug, and she nestled into him. After a long silence he said quietly.

'What a night eh?'

She sat up, and burst into tears which she wiped away quickly.

'You know I think I'm in shock. I don't know if I'm more shocked by the fire, or seeing the burning church, or I saw that man running away'.

'Or that the police think you are an easy trollop'.

She sighed.

'And that. Do you want to come in for a cocoa?'

He nodded, and she unlocked her front door and turned on the lights in her front room, and put on the kettle. Inside the two-storied cottage was much smarter than his place. There was an original painting of some sort on the staircase and a couple of small sculptures on the massive sideboard. He belatedly suspected that Felicity had taste. And a little money it seemed, for she had some splendid antique furniture amidst the modern fittings. Micklethwaite never ceased to be surprised at how many English single men and women still lived surrounded by their parents stuff.

'My father loved antiques, and I've kept the best'.

'Is this what they call a parlour?'

Micklethwaite hadnt been here before, but it was very similar to his cottage. The

front door opened immediately to a front room, which connected to the kitchen in a wide doorway.

'Yes, it's a tiny house. I rent it from the Cathedral Board, but it suits me. Oh Gordon what are we going to do? Will the police arrest us?'

'For what? Snogging? I don't think it's a crime. They didn't even know who we were.'

'But the church burning down?'

'Vandals, louts, happens all the time. Fireworks around everywhere.'

'I suppose that's true, but we know that isnt the real story? Someone to tried to kill you'.

'Maybe. Maybe I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But they were Molotov cocktails, I'm sure of that'.

'Molotov cocktails?'

'Bottles filled with petrol and a lighted fuse. Three of them'.

'Vandals would do that?'

'Murderers more likely. They would have seen my torch flicking about inside'.

'I'm getting scared now Gordon, but no one knew we were going?.

'Well I told Martin… yesterday I think. I said Wednesday'.

She shook her head.

'Martin would do this?

'You said he was a big man?'

'Yes, I know, but..'

'And Martin was at the Beacons carpark when the Bentley went over the edge, and he is constantly saying he is a guardian angel.'

'But he is weird'.

Micklethwaite grinned.

'Never was a human being more aptly named. I don't know what's going on Felicity, but there are a lot of strange mishaps and accidents that seem more than coincidence'.

He observed her worried face.

'Look Felicity, don't worry too much. I know it was a shock but we need to digest what happened. Tomorrow we can talk about it in depth, see what we can fathom out. It's late now, and I don't think we are in any danger or trouble. We are just a couple of filing clerks arent we really, got tangled up in who knows what? Tomorrow it willl seem clearer'.

Now he could have opened up more here, after all there was a lot more to say and explain but he felt that she had had quite enough shocks this evening and did not want to unduly disturb her. The tears had rattled him slightly.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Now about that cup of tea'.

'Oh yes, I forgot'.

She jumped up and made tea in the teapot and fossicked in the kitchen cupboard for biscuits. She handed him a cup of tea with a biscuit perched precariously on the edge, and they sat on the sofa. Micklethwaite noticed that she seemed to have forgotten she offered cocoa. Tea was probably her default habit. She suddenly remembered the error.

'Oh, I promised cocoa didn't I?'

'Tea is better'.

She noticed Micklethwaite was staring at the abstract painting over the fireplace

'You like the painting?' she asked

'Did you do it?' She nodded

'Yes, it's nice'.

'Would you have said that if I had said no'.

Micklethwaite was amused at the teasing look in her eye.

'Probably'.

Their conversation seemed balanced at an awkward point of being polite, or plunging back into seriousness, each person waiting for someone to take the initiative. She eventually broke the silence.

'That was a nice kiss in the car Gordon'.

'My pleasure'.

'I'm not used to kissing, it was a surprise. Spinsters don't kiss that much. It reminded me of something, something I wanted to ask you before, but I havn't found the right time. Maybe this isn't the right time either'.

She looked serious now and he looked at her, somewhat nervously.

'It makes what I have to say rather hard. I want to ask you a favour'.

'Oh, of course'.

It was a glib reply. It would be something to do with the archives probably. Help her out on her research, or do some sorting out amongst the church records, and God knows they were... His brain got interrupted by an extraordinary question.

'Would you sleep with me?'

The request came so gently and naturally that Micklethwaite thought he hadn't heard it quite right, and was automatically going to make his naturally glib reply, 'of course', when he turned and looked at her.

Yes, it was still Felicity Givens sitting there, with her tasteful black top and plaited skirt. Her face still had smudges of tears. Her glasses hadn't steamed up with passion and they showed the same elusive brown-green eyes that the customs department would inevitably stamp 'hazel' on her passport in the little box 'eye colour', which was next door to the other little box which said 'sex'. Vague, very vague, but this request was anything but vague. Explicit rather, a little too explicit. There were no tears in her eyes, and not exactly a begging tone either, but some hint of a struggle within.

Micklethwaite opened his mouth and left it open ('catching flies are you' his mum would say tartly), and other statements could have come out in the fifteen or so seconds that had elapsed, but in the end what came out was rather lame.

> 'That's an unusual thing to ask a man'.

She smiled brightly.

> 'Is it? I always assumed men rather like that sort of thing, I mean I know little about love, I thought in these modern days girls ask that sort of question all the time. Well they do on tv anyway'.

She put down her cup and looked down at it.

> 'You see, I've lived alone for the last few years, and although I'm not lonely, despite what Mr Pringle says...'

She looked up and smiled thinly and Micklethwaite smiled half-heartedly back wondering what more revelations were coming..

> '... I would like to know how to love, properly, not platonically. Everyone else seems to know how to love, in the magazines and on the television, that's all the talk is these days it seeems, but I don't. Not really. I enjoy being a spinster, but I don't much like being a virgin'.

The only sound was the grumbling of the refrigerator in the kitchen, and their own breathing. Micklethwaite tried to pull himself out of the situation with a joke

> 'No one wants to be a virgin, unless you're a nun'.

But Felicity was not having any of it.

> 'You see, you are a stranger, from another land. Here for a short while. You have no girlfriend, no commitment to another person. I like you and I don't want to let the opportunity pass me by this time, like it has before. I'm not begging, just asking. You can say no'.
>
> 'Felicity...'
>
> 'You don't find me attractive?'

Now she was begging, and this was beyond awkward. A sadness was dropping over her face and eyes. Micklethwaite was bewildered. This was hopelessly embarassing. He had no particular objection to making love to her, but no good reason to either.

'Felicity, love has to have some chemistry, it's...' words failed him.

'Then I am doomed. Sorry to have troubled you'.

She was wilting before his eyes.

'Don't be ridiculous, of course I'll, I'll sleep, errmm, sleep with you'.

They both stared at each other in surprise at this sudden acquiescence.

'You're sure?' she asked 'I'm rather a beginner'.

He stood up. The words had rushed out of him, perhaps he had let them, so as to get himself out of an excrutiatingly position as if he had been caught naked, not the other way round. But in the last few seconds he had changed his mind about her.

'I don't know why everyone says librarians are boring'.

'I shocked you?'

'Well yes, you did' he swore but he was still ruefully smiling.

'That's the first time I've heard you swear Gordon'.

'I save it for special occasions'.

'I think you swore when we tumbled over in the woodland' she teased him.

'It's been that kind of night'.

'You had your hands on my throat, I thought you were going to kill me. I didn't even know it was you'.

'Sorry about that'.

'I think I lost my scarf there…'

He reached out to her and brought her head onto his shoulder, and there it stayed for some minutes as she pulled his arms around her. Then she tilted her head and Micklethwaite kissed her for a long time, her lips softened to mush. They separated.

'That was another nice kiss. I'll put the cups away then'.

Micklethwaite was sure that at some point there would be an interruption to this bizarre scene, someone would snap their fingers, the stage manager would give new directions and he would be told that he'd read the lines all wrong and to start again. But no, the play, if it was a play, continued calmly. She put the milk back in the fridge and Gossworth suddenly remembered some technical details from his past.

'I don't have any... err, condoms' he said sheepishly.

'Well, now, it's my turn to be shocked. Are men really always that prepared?

I would be shocked if you had a supply on you Gordon, I wouldn't think you were that kind of man at all. I'm pleased you're not. I had my menopause last year, very early the doctor said, so at 44...'

She folded the teatowel and looked at him whimsically. He asked

'Were you afraid I'd say no?'.

'No, I was more afraid you'd say 'yes' straight away. You hesitated. I liked that. Shall I go up now?'

He nodded and decided he would never understand women ever in his life. She walked up the stairs, and he could hear her rustling in the cupboards. Then the main light was switched off, and he heard the bed creak. He leaned against the door for support then gave himself a shake and trudged up the stairs. It wasn't in his nature to run away, and she was waiting.

'Shall I turn off the light now?'

She nodded and for the first time blushed. He turned off the light, and quickly removed his clothes and fumbled into her bed. Felicity Givens eased over to his side and kissed him, and that was quite enough encouragement for two naked bodies that seldom received such incentives.

It was 7.30 in the morning before he got back out onto the narrow lane again, still misty and moist. He'd woken up to find Felicity snuggled up beside him, looking like a young girl. This he found irrisistable and arousing, and the second occasion of love-making was far less perfunctory than the first. There was passion in it, and they both knew it. She fell asleep again.

As he quietly dressed she woke up and regarded his half-dressed body with some satisfaction. Felicity watched him.

'Robert Louis Stevenson, had a father who gave him a piece of advice. Always sleep with older women, they are very discreet and very grateful'.

Micklethwaite hadn't heard this one before.

'Really?'

He hopped about on one leg pulling on his trousers.

'Really. I'm truly very grateful Gordon, and I won't tell'.

He tied the laces on his shoes and straightened up trying not to yawn.

'I can't imagine any dad giving that advice to his daughters'.

He grabbed his backpack.

'A pity Gordon, after all that drama, we didn't get the magazines'.

Micklethwaite grinnned, and like a magician pulled out the missing volume from his backpack.

'Here it is, number 1938, all four issues. I saw it and grabbed it from the

sacristy as I was leaving. It was the last thing I did before I jumped the wall. Anyway, see you later Filly. I'll have a shower and be in the office by 10ish'.

Felicity stared at him open mouthed for some reason, then buried herself in the warmth of the bed. He kissed the soft part of her face that looked out and clumped down the stairs. By the river Micklethwaite paused over a railing and watched as two ducks paddled over excitedly. He whistled badly, as boys who've been boys have whistled since time began. Miss Givens had given. It was a silly pun, but it stuck in his head for the rest of the morning.

Chapter 13

The Unrivalled Scarf

Wednesday 23 November

Sex with Felicity Givens had not solved anything, in fact it had made things worse.

He had not realised that until they met in the archives office the same day and was aware that suddenly their relationship had changed. Were they lovers now? Partners in crime? He had got home, showered and glanced through the 1938 volume, and this time because the photos were crisp and sharp, he hit the jackpot straight away. Which did not necessarily explain anything. Embarassing sure, but it was forty years ago, and were these photos worth murdering for? Yet someone had gone to a lot of trouble to delete 1938 from the archives. That can't be for nothing, surely? Someone had just tried to kill him with molotov cocktails: that was not nothing.

He got to the archive office at 11 am, his head still fuzzy with lack of sleep, and he certainly did not feel like filing today!

Felicity wasn't there, but then it was her day off. He wrote some thoughts down on paper, tucked it into his pocket and went down to the local café for a bun and coffee. He bought a newspaper and the *Chaucester Gazzete* did mention the church fire, but they had only been able to squeeze in a short paragraph in the later edition. No mention of lovers spooning but the policeman suggested it was something to do with fireworks and louts as usual. Poor Reverend Rodgers would be horribly upset to see his beloved church ruined.

He got back to the café well after one and Felicity was sitting at her desk looking forlorn. He gave her a hug and she returned a weak smile.

> 'Isnt it your day off?'
>
> 'I fel I ought to be here. My head is spinning so much. Percy and Julia have gone to St Peters this morning to take a look at the damage, and they are taking Reverend Rodgers with them'.
>
> 'The reverend is going to be devastated'.
>
> 'What are we going to say Gordon?'

'The newspaper said the police were blaming vandals with fireworks'.

He handed over the newspaper.

'Let's just play it by ear. Don't worry, it's not our fault'.

'But that man I saw?'

'Maybe it was a hooligan, and we were just there at the wrong time. The rev said there had been problems with vandalism in the past. Smashed windows, that sort of things'.

Suddenly the door opened and Julia Graham the archdeacon walked in briskly.

'Thought I'd find you two here, so you've seen the paper. St Peters of the Poor church burnt out'.

'Destroyed?" asked Fellcity anxiously.

'Down to the stone walls anyway. The bishop was shocked and the Reverend Rodgers was in tears. Poor fellow'.

'Dreadful thing to have happened' said Felicity

Julia looked sharply at her. She missed very little did Julia.

'There's been issues there before, even if it is on military land, and supposedly protected. It was part of my Deanery you see, after all it is still church property, but I thought the army could better protect these things, they seemed rather apologetic'.

'You spoke to the police?' asked Micklethwaite.

'Just the sergeant. Said it happened about eigtht last evening. Thought he saw some fireworks going off. Who knows, it's done now'.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a scarf, a pretty one with a Japanese motif on it.

'Is this your scarf Felicity? It's quite distinctive isn't it? And I found it on the woodland holloway leading to St Peter's this morning'.

Felicity looked startled.

'I don't know what…'

Stammered Felicity casting an anxious glance at Gordon that clearly said 'help me'.

'It is your scarf isn't it? I didn't mention it to the bishop, he has enough on his plate. Felicity what were you doing near St Peters of the Poor last night? It is off limits you know. Did you see the fire?'

Gordon glanced quickly at Felicity who was looking petrified. Time to barge in.

'It was my idea Julia, sorry. You see we were looking for some missing parish magazines, 1938. The vicar at St Michaels, Nicholas Rodgers told

us that he was the last priest at St Peters, and all about the old vicarage and church on military land, and he gave us the key. He thought there was a set of magazines in the vestry'.

'Why are you so interested in Parish Magazines 1938?'

Gordon shrugged.

'1938 was the year my mother had her wedding photo in the magazine, so she said. I havn't been able to find it anywhere, not even in the local library'.

'I have got a complete set of Diocese Magazines in my room, that would have saved you a lot of trouble'.

'I bet you 1938 isn't there, have a look'.

'I will, but anyway, who set the church on fire?'

'We don't know. I had unlocked the door and was in the church alone, Felicity had waited in the car. Suddenly I heard noises outside, then voices maybe prowlers or young teens looking for trouble. There was some yelling. They started a fire at the back and threw fireworks into the church. I was lucky to get out'.

'You didn't tell the police?'

'No'.

'Why not?'

Julia noticed a quick glance by Felicity at Gordon.

'It was horrible' said Felicity 'I heard some noises and ran down the track and crashed into Gordon coming the other way. I suppose the scarf fell off then'.

'Strange…'

There was a strong glance between Micklethwaite and the archdeacon, more than a glance, perhaps an understanding when both people realise that there is more at stake than meets the eye.

'Hmmm, I will now look for that magazine. I'm sure you're wrong'.

Five minutes she came back.

'1938 is missing, gone. Why?'

Gordon shrugged.

'The bishop wanted me to write a Diocese history and I wanted a full set of the magazines, to start my research. Not a big deal, but I couldnt find them anywhere, so well I was puzzled.'

'How do you know they were even printed? It was the depression wasn't it?'

‘Yes, but we have a record in the index of those magazines’.

Julia looked at them thoughtfully, searchingly. She asked.

‘How’s your research going?’

Julia spotted another nervous glance between Felicity at Gordon.

‘Good’.

‘Something is not quite right here. Are you telling me the full story you two? There’s something else going on’.

At that point Felicity blushed and Julia guessed correctly.

‘Are you two having an affair?’

Felicity blushed again. Julia grumped and clipped her bag shut.

‘So a tete-a-tete out in lovers lane, how sweet. No wonder you look a bit embarassed, but I suppose it’s not illegal. The sergeant mentioned he saw a couple out there, but I would never have imagined that the randy lovers were you two’.

Micklethwaite shrugged and said nothing. Felicity was bright red.

‘Silence is a good answer. Well at least you are getting more sex than I am. Keep me up to date with your research won’t you?’

She looked ironic.

‘In whatever form it takes’.

She walked out. and Gordon remarked.

‘She doesn’t miss much does she?’

Felicity expostulated.

‘Gordon that wasn’t even slightly near the truth…that story of vandals and yelling and fireworks. We never heard anything, we have no idea of who….’

‘No, but it was plausible’.

‘I don’t think Julia even believed you?”

‘No’.

‘Why didn’t you tell her about the molotov cocktails…

‘I don’t know really’.

‘Gordon. I’m getting scared… Shouldn’t we tell the police?’

‘But you know it could just have been young lads, we just picked the wrong night. We don’t know that there definitely someone was trying to murder me.’

‘That man tho…’

‘Yes. Only one … not a gang of louts’.

Felicity brushed her hair back and sighed,

‘Sorry about the scarf. It must have slipped off when we bumped into each other’.

Gordon gave a her a hug

‘Don’t worry, I think Julia is on our side’

‘Really? What side is that?’

‘The side of truth, honesty and some good sex’.

‘Oh so you enjoyed it then?’

‘Yes’.

‘Hmm, Ive got nothing to compare it with, but it seemed alright’.

‘Alright?’

‘Quite alright. Is that better?’

Micklethwaites his experience was fairly limited as well, but he thought it was better than ‘alright’. Although in fairness he had heard women complain of the rather disappointing nature of the sex act.

‘Hmmm’.

Felicity asked cautiously.

‘Gordon? Did you find anything in the 1938 edition?’

‘No. nothing. I can’t see what all the fuss is about. I looked hard this morning, but it’s a dead end. I’ll bring the book in tomorrow’.

God he was good at lying! He was shameless, but he needed time to think things through. Felicity confessed.

‘I’m in shock I think. Still in shock. There’s just too much happening. You think the police will ring me? They will ask me what was I doing that night? Who was I kissing? My little boring ordinary life isn’t supposed to be like this, and I blame you Gordon. Tea?’

‘Why not?’

She asked.

‘Who was Molotov anyway?’

‘A barman!’

She sighed at his quip and busied around the kettle and caddy, looking to find calm in the universal solace of the English tea ceremony. He looked at her. She was not unattratcive, naïve perhaps, and he lied then because he didn’t want to hurt her feelings, which was true, and they might have been hurt if he had told her the truth.

He supped the tea and stared out the window. He needed more time to think. It was still Wednesday, Wednesday afternoon, still only the same day he had left Felicity alone in her warm bed that morning. So much had happened. What with nearly burnt to death in a church with a madman throwing cocktails at him, shagging a spinster, dealing with putting up with the archdeacons jibes, lying several times through his teeth — it had been a frantic 24 hours — only 24 hours?! Unbelievable. Who said that life in the archives was dull.

The archival office telephone rang, a rare event. Felicity answered nervously and semed relieved it wasn't the police, who would surely drag off to jail for committing the unspeakable crime of lust.

'It's your mother'.

'Really?"

His mother said her sister was seriously ill and she needed help. It looked like the thinking might have to wait.

Chapter 14

Near the Edge of Christmas

24 November — 3 December

Suddenly Christmas was getting serious. It wasn't cold enough to snow, but it was cold enough. The air seemed to be dark all day, and Christmas carolls were being sung in the cathedral as the choristers practised hard. Micklethwaite listened to them once and felt quite moved by the scale of the architecture and the choristers soaring voices. A week had passed since the church of St Peters of the Poor had been set on fire. In many ways it was a wasted week for him, since Micklethwaite needed to pursue his ideas further, but he did not know how to do it.

His mothers sister had become seriously ill and his mother could no longer look after her sister at home. She had to be moved into a nursing home, which involved no end of kerfuffle. Finding the right place was difficult as they were all more or less ghastly, but they settled on one less horrible than the others. Then there was furniture to be shifted, selecting knick knacks and mementoes to be cherished, organising finance, and just dealing with an ailing person who was confused, and maybe even had the first signs of dementia. His mother needed all sorts of support, and Micklethwaite found himself completely sucked into the what was the sad predicament of being old and helpless.

He caught snatches of people that week. After going back to the library on Monday he looked into the archive office again, But Felicity wasn't there. Julia was striding along the corridor.

'You seem cheerful Julia'

'I'm always cheerful' and she strode off.

He shouted after her.

'Have you seen Felicity?'

'She's with Percy'.

Stating she was cheerful was so manifestly untrue that Gordon could only smile and

swallow his words. Then in the courtyard Martin Strange approached him in that gothic walk of his, rather loping and determined, like a raven hopping along. He seized Micklethwaite.

> 'Now Gordon, I must see you, soon. At a time convenient to you. I want to show you something at the Beacons Lookout. I promise you a revelation, and it will be an encounter that we will both benefit from. A God chosen spot I think'.
>
> 'Really?'

Micklethwaite was not at all sure about this, but agreed to meet the chaplain at the Beacons carpark at 3pm on Friday. This satisfied Martin who continued his stalk down the Cathedral Close. Exactly at this time he glanced over and saw Bert Pringle waving and signalling to him from the workshop door. Everyone wanted his attention today.

> 'Come in, come in, Jordan. Me and the boys at the workshop are having a jar at the The Mitre Inn tonight, you want to come along?'

The pub was just outside the Cathedral precinct and Micklethwaite had been there once before. His instinct was to say no, but then he realised he did need to ask Bert some questions and maybe a bit of alcohol might lubricate the old workman better. This turned out to be true.

Monday at the pub was a happening place. The pub was already busy at seven with pre-Christmas office parties, in fact it was way too noisy for any sensible conversation. The boys were playing darts and getting very boistrous. Normally gregarious at the best of times, Bert was in his elelment. The loudest of them of them all, and his accent reminded Micklethwaite of a film he had seen with Stanley Holloway, drinking and wenching at the same time. So it was hopeless for a quiet chat, until, to his surprise, Bert motioned to him to go into the lounge bar, which was much quieter. He lit his pipe.

> 'I wanted a chat Jordon, you know, about the cake?'

The cake?! Micklethwaite had completely forgotten about the poisoned cake.

> 'Did you get it tested?'

He couldn't admit that the piece of cake he picked up from the floor was still rotting in his fridge.

> 'No, the results havn't come back yet'.
>
> 'Pity. It's been bothering me. Poor Daisy. Dunno why she had to die. Look at that church business you know, St Peters, who would burn down a lovely old church like that?'.

Micklethwaite seized his chance.

> 'Bert? Can I ask you a personal question?'

Bert was in an expansive mood

'Sure young fellah'.

'How long had Mrs Rattenbury been blackmailing you?'

Pringle gave what can only be called an old-fashioned look at Gordon.

'You know about that?'

'She had a copy of the court case in her files'.

'Did she the witch. You saw it?'

Micklethwaite had the photocopy in his pocket and showed it to Bert, who didn't seem surprised. Albert sighed, paused and looked around, and dropped his voice.

'Its because you're from New Zealand and you wont be telling anyone else? You swear never to tell anyone else? Well I was arrested once, hanging out in mens toilets, caught with another man. There was a court case. I got fined. It was twenty years ago and Mrs Rottenbury found out. She started blackmailing me. I had to pay her £5 a week for her to keep her mouth shut, or she'd tell the bishop'.

'You didn't have to pay her? Things are different now'.

'Yeah, maybe, but this was in the sixties you know? Being queer was still illegal then yer know. I could lose my job, everything, so I paid up'.

'When did you start paying her?'

'Orrr, ten years ago maybe'.

Micklethwaite did a quick calculation.

'That's £250 a year, that's £2500 pounds Bert!'

'Yeah well, I did it to shut her up at first and then I couldn't think of a way to stop it. Short of murdering her, which by the way, I really wanted to do. Her death over the cliff was the happiest day of my life, I'm telling you! I told you I had my reasons!'

'Was she blackmailing anyone else?'

'Dunno, wouldn't put it past the dragon. She loved the power yer know? It wasn't the money, it was the power'.

Bert looked at Micklethwaite shrewdly.

'Was she?'

Micklethwaite shrugged and finished his beer. Bert ruminated to himself.

'Tell you something about the old dragon, I never saw her excited by anything, never happy about anything, except once, about two months ago. I remember this well. Her office door was half open and I was fixing the cupboard door opposite, twiddlly litle thing, so she couldn't see me really, and

she yelled out ‘ I found it, I found it!’

‘Found what?’

‘Dunno, she was excited though. Maybe some other poor bastard was getting screwed eh? Anyway, back to the boys, you coming’.

‘Ive done my dash thanks Bert. I wont talk or tell’

‘Knew you wouldn’t. See yer later’.

Mrs Rattenbury was a nasty piece of work, so no surprise there, but Micklethwaite felt pleased that he was slowly piecing things together. One more jig in the saw, if that was a genuine expression.

He had time to pick up his prints from the photo shop on Tuesday, and also managed to squeeze in a visit to the library to research the 1930s, and the activities of the BUF. After a hectic weekend moving the sister into new digs, he suddenly and belatedly remembered Felicity again. He popped into the archive office on Tuesday to explain to Felicity why he wasnt working, and she looked up, seemingly pleased and forlorn at the same time.

‘My mum and I had to move her sister into the rest home this weekend, sorry I havn’t seen you. It’s quite a buusiness. How have you been?’

‘It’s been quiet, very quiet without you’.

An awkward pause as Micklethwaite remembered that technically he was in a relationship and had to demonstrate it meant something too him.

‘Oh. Perhaps I could come around to your place this afternoon…’

She brightened.

‘Ok. I will make a cake. A new recipe’.

He knocked on her door at five, and she quickly let him in. He could smell the cake and her little parlour looked cosy with the coal fire in the grate. Micklethwaite sipped the tea whle standing with his back to the coal fire and noticed she was wearing a new top, and suddenly intuited he might be the reason. He put down his cup of tea and she looked up at him. Quite impulsively he reached out to her pulled her up and embraced her in a passionate kiss.

‘Gordon, I mean…’

And she gave in, gratefully, and he felt her body melt around his. Upstairs the lovemaking was quite furious, almost anxious, as if they both wanted to reconnect after the week long pause. She snuggled up to him.

‘Well, that was a surprise, a nice surprise. I’m learning about men. They don’t muck around do they?’

He smirked.

‘Evolution and all that’.

She turned onto one shoulder and glanced over his naked body. She said thoughtfully.

'I enjoy sex too much I think'.

'It's not a sin, unless it is out of wedlock'.

Felicity did not answer, but frowned.

'The bishop took me out to see the ruins of St Peters of the Poor church, its so sad. Just a shell really. It was creepy seeing what happened. He talked about establishing a restoration fund'.

'Does the army still own it?'

'Yes, but Percy said they are quite keen to move it back to church ownership now. This fire has precipitated them'.

'Nothing in the papers then, about the fire?'

'Just that it was vandals they think'.

'No mention of lovers snogging in dark lanes?'

'Really Gordon, no, thankfully'.

Gordon noddded and pulled her closer to him. He knew the age gap was awkward but she was still a woman and he felt a warmth towards her. He wasn't in love of course, then he did not think Felicity was in love with him either. The pillow talk continued onto another tack.

'Gordon. Werent you going to give me that volume from of the Diocese Magazine? Number 1938'.

'Oh yes, I forgot'.

He handed it over.

'Did you find anything?'

'What?'

'About 1938'

'I learnt a lot about garden parties, and that no one thought they would be a World War in one years time. And the Anglican church had a lot of clubs… Felicity? I'd really like to ask Percy something'.

She sat up.

'I'd like to ask Percy what really happened on the Beacons Lookout with Mrs Rattenbury.'

She shifted her position in bed, a subtle move but somehow it put a small distance between her and Gordon.

'You don't think it was an accident'.

‘No I don’t’.

He explained about the red pebbles and the hacksawed bolts, and Felicity’s face grew longer and more serious, and almost shrivelled up a little.

‘I suppose I could arrange a meeting? I see him most days’.

‘Ok. Don’t be sad Felicity, I can’t prove this, or anything really’.

‘Would you tell the police, of your suspicions?’

‘I will talk to the bishop first. I mean there ought to be a reasonable explanation for all this, shouldn’t there?’

She nodded carefully, put on her clothes quietly and the passion she had showed thirty minutes before slipped away and Felicity Givens, the archivist, re-emerged. It’s funny how a persona can change thought Micklethwaite. Do we ever really know a person, or for that matter, even ourselves?

Chapter 15

A Man in a Dark Shirt

Tuesday 29 December

It was dark and wet outside as he walked home, with maybe some sleet on the way. Felicity didn't seem to want him to stay and he still had a lot on his mind. He turned on the electric fire, and the television was blurting out some football news so he switched it off. It was time to do the thinking that he had put off for some days.

He cleared a space on the table and opened Volume 38 of the Diocese Magazine at the pages he knew by heart, and placed the two photocopies alongside the pages. In these faded passages was a secret so bad that someone really wanted to hide it, and was prepared to kill to hide it. The two photos were crisper and sharper in the volume compared to his murky photocopies, and they showed the same groups of men in black shirts in a sort of parade. His photocopy did not show any captions, but Volume 38 did.

The men were holding a flag, very distinctive, with a lightning bolt shot through it. The article underneath the photo on the caption said that this was a church meeting of the 'Peace in our Time' committee, an important group of influential local churchmen, and they had invited a speaker from the British Union of Fascists, a man named Oswald Mosely, and the text remarked he was known as 'a very good orator'. Mosely had been popular in the 1930's, but already the tide was turning. In 1936 BUF had fought a pitched battle against the Jews and communists of East London in the infamous battle of Cable Street, and this conflict had alarmed the government and they passed *The Public Order Act 1936*, where quasi-military style of uniforms, like black shirts, were banned. But here in these photos of 1938 there were plenty of black shirts on view. Perhaps it was hard to ban a black shirt for just for being black.

Despite the war getting closer and closer, and the blackshirts being banned, it was undoubtedly true that Oswald Mosely was still attracting big crowds, and in July 1939 (just two months before the outbreak of World War Two) over 30,000 supporters had met in Earls Court London for a protest rally. Finally in 1940, the British Union of Fascists were proscribed, and Mosely was put in the Tower of London.

That was sort of ironic, the place where traitors were held for a 1000 years, but he wasn't enclosed in the dungeons but in a house in the grounds.

He read all about the BUF in the library, and learned that although all the BUF were called blackshirts this was incorrect. In fact it was only the military wing of the BUF that mostly wore blackshirts, (as well as Mosely himself, who affected a sort of Hitler-like moustache and swagger), and they'd gained a reputation as the 'heavies', the hired hoods, or to put it politely, crowd control.

Micklethwaite rubbed his forehead at these complexities and tangled allegiances.

What made this situation and these photos so peculiar was that this was a Cathedral chapter of the blackshirts. That the Anglican diocese supported the BUF was bizarre, and they had their own fascist group and the men to enforce it as well. But in the context of the 1930's a church organisation that supported the BUF wasn't so surprsing. The British Union of Fascists then were seen as a law-and-order party, which was against the war, a party that was right wing, pro-Christian in attitude, and even had government influence. War did not seem inevitable then, except to Winston Churchill, and he was not in power.

The political atmosphere in those days was charged with uncertaintly. Neville Chamberlains appeasement policy was highly popular, and most people did not want war, and not everyone in England thought Hitler was an enemy. Some outright sympathised with the Nazis and blamed the Jews. Even with war looming the BUF was a force to be reckoned with and the British government had to steer a course between controlling this fascist organisation, and trying to shut mad Mosely up, yet not upsetting quite senior members of their own conservative party and even royalty who gave the BUF tacit backing.

Gordon turned on the table lamp and peered closely at the two photographs.

Both showed a line of blackshirts, all young men, and you could easily pick out their faces. But at the end of one row was someone who looked remarkably liked Percy. But you didn't have to guess, because the caption underneath identifield the six men clearly: Smith, Fields, Turner, Church, Partridge and lastly Somerville; Percy Somerville, a member of the 'heavies', a blackshirt in 1938.

The problem for Percy was not that he had been in the British Union of Fascists, (that was common enough in the 1930's), and quite respectable lords and businessmen supported the organisation, but that he had been a blackshirt. An extreme member of the BUF, perfectly happy to beat up the opposition if necessary.

This was the big secret, the reason why someone removed the 1938 volumes, cut out the microfiche and threw molotov cocktails at him in St Peters of the Poor church, with every intention of frying him to death. So was it the bishop trying to kill him? The kindly, avuncular, jolly bishop making stringent efforts to hide his dark past? It seemed absurd, and Micklethwaite could not quite accept this obvious explanation.

The man that Felicity saw was running hard and Micklethwaite did not think that the bishop could run hard these days. But Martin Strange? Was he acting on the bishops orders and prepared to be the bishops guardian angel. That was a possibility. Espe-

cially as Martin was also present at the carpark when the Bently was shoved off. The chaplain often turned up at critical moments in the bishops life, and as he remarked in his religious way, was prepared to do *anything*.

By now Micklethwaite was convinced that the car going over the cliff was no accident, and he felt that somehow the bishop was involved. Hell, he had a motive! Would they make him an Archbishop of Canterbury if they knew he was a blackshirt? No. It would stain his reputation irrevocably, of course it would. And he was sure Mrs Rattenbury had been quietly blackmailing the bishop already, so this was the bishops way of disposing of that horrid woman. It did make sense, except, His Grace?

Micklethwaite gave a big yawn.

There was another person to consider who might have helped the bishop. Julia Graham was smart, efficient, perfectly capable of organising that car set up at the Beacons carpark. Didn't Felicity say that Julia had an affair with the bishop years ago, so perhaps she still had feelings for him. Who knew? She was an enigma to him, almost too good to be true, yet she too seemed above board, but then they all did really. Who would have believed that such foetid desires and nefarious intents would exist amongst the solid citizens in the Cathedral chapter, yet, yet, they all went to the Foul Play Club, so there must be darkness in their souls somewhere.

Micklethwaite folded the volume, slipped the photocopies back into an envelope, then thoughtfully tapped his pen on the table. It was hard to escape the conclusion that someone knew why he was trying to locate volume 1938, but they did not necessarily know he had found it. Also they were very keen to get rid of Gordon Micklethwaite. He was a nuisance to them, more than that: a threat. He stood up and checked the front door was locked. It was November, winter, harshly cold, and despite his calm assurances to Felicity not to worry, there was a world of darkness and chill out there. A world with less and less daylight.

It was definitely time to talk to Julia Graham.

Chapter 16

A Line of Red Stones

Thursday 2 December

Two days later he knocked on the former Mrs Rattenbury's door.

'Come in'.

Julia was as always business like, efficient and impatient to move on.

It's a nice room'.

He ventured this comment as a timid opening line. Julia would have none of that nonsense.

'I'm sure Gordon you didn't come in to tell me that it's a nice room' she said firmly.

'No. Errr, did you ever wonder about Mrs Rattenbury's death?'

'Wonder what?'

'That it was an accident?'

'What else could it be?'

'It was an odd accident'.

'Gordon, odd accidents happen all the time, my grandmother slipped over on a bar of soap'.

He took out his photos and placed them before her.

'I took these at the carpark of the Beacons Lookout, a few days after the accident. The parking has been sealed off by the police so it hasn't been touched. You see these lines of red pebbles, here and here, indistinct but

clear enough once they are pointed out, two of them, forming a sort of broad road pointing at the broken railing'.

Julia looked at them, and then looked at him.

'And, they mean…'

'These photos show the railing bolts. There were only two of them holding the rail in place, one on each post. Not enough really. If you look closely you can see that it looks as if they have been partially been cut, hacksawed I think. There's a cut line there and a piece of metal tongue just remaining where the hacksaw didn't cut right through, but the bolt snapped off when the car hit the rail'.

Julia looked at the photos more carefully, but said nothing. Micklethwaite continued.

'You see I think someone lined up the car, the Bishops car between those lines of red pebbles, and used them as a guideway towards the weakened railing'.

Julia leaned back and stared hard at Micklethwaite who stood quietly waiting for her reaction.

'You mean the Bishop did this? Have you talked to the police?

'No, I wanted to chat to you first'.

'Why?'

'Because the red pebbles come from your cottage pathway'.

Julia scoffed.

'Now come on, red pebbles like this are found everywhere!'

'True, but not in the cathedral precincts. And they are a precise match in size'.

He pulled a sample pebble from his pocket and placed it on Julias desk who picked it up and turned it in her fingers.

'You think I did it? You can't be serious.'

'I'm not'.

'Then are you then suggesting the bishop murdered Mrs Rattenbury?'

'Maybe he had help. Martin Strange was there as well, on the clifftop.'

'That's ridiculous, why on earth would Martin and Percy do such a thing!'

Micklethwaite brought out the 1938 volume of the Diocesan Magazine. Julias eyes opened wide in acknowledgement

'Ah, the 1938 volume at last. I know you were not being honest with me. That was a lie about your mother wasn't it?'

‘It was a convenient mistruth…’

‘’Where did this volume come from?’

‘St Peters of the Poor church….’

He opened the volume and pointed to the photo of the group standing beside the cathedral precinct.

‘There’s another photo on the next page’.

She stared at the photos for a long time, flicking the pages back and forth, almost angrily. The silence deepened. Micklethwaite plunged in.

‘Did you know that Percy was a blackshirt in the British Union of Fascists’.

‘He forgot to mention it’.

‘It is him isnt it?’

At this point Julia rested her head on her hands and kept looking at the photos. Gordon ventured a comment into this suffocating silence.

‘Would that be enough to scupper the Bishops chances of being Archbishop? I mean he was in the militia part of the BUF, the crowd control, the police, the hired thugs really’.

‘It was a youthful indiscretion.’

‘But what if the papers, the tabloids got hold of it?’

She banged her fist on the table.

‘Yes, yes, you made your point, it would be enough to destroy his chances. The monarch has to appove any Archbishops posting, and knowing her war work I cannot imagine her allowing this, but why in God’s name didn’t Percy tell me.’

Then she thought about something.

‘Why would the tabloids or anyone need to know this? This is forty years ago. I’m not going to say anything, will you?’

Micklethwaite had sat uninvited in the chintz chair opposite. Julia despite her cool bravado and crisp manner, had lost a lot of her assurance. She added.

‘Anyway, there’s no connection to this dreadful accident. A line of pebbles, there’s no link here, nothing.’

But Julia stopped as she saw Micklethwaite’s raised eyebrows.

‘There’s something else isn’t there?’

Micklethwaite brought out the original photocopies and placed them beside Julia.

‘Mrs Rattenbury was a blackmailer. There are these photocopies of the photos found of 1938, which I found hidden under her desk, and they have her writing along the top. Here, and here. I’ve checked the writing, and it looks

like Mrs Rattenburys hand. She found these photos in the Diocese Magazine and was blackmailing Percy over them. It's not her first time by the way. She was blackmailing Albert Pringle for his homosexual conviction twenty years ago, he told me last night… Did you know about that?'

'Yes I knew about his conviction. But why would Violet do this?'

She shook her head, and then answered her own question.

'Probably she wanted money, lots of it. She's always complained of being poor'.

'Or power' added Gordon 'a lot of blackmailers say they like the power over the victim…'

She stood up and stared out of the window.

'I was happy till you came in. Job going well, met a new man, liked him, maybe start a new relationship, but this has destroyed that happiness. God I wish you hadn't shown me those damn photos. Now I will wonder, always wonder'.

She asked him straight out.

'Do you think Martin Strange pushed the car?'

'Maybe. I think he helped the bishop a lot, he even appointed himself as the bishops guardian angel'.

'God you've dug deep into this, but it's still sketchy. Ok you've proved a link between the blackshirts and the bishop, and you've probably shown that Mrs Rattenbury was a blackmailer, and you've proved a possible motive. But it might have been an accident you know? This evidence doesn't preclude that. Pebbles on the ground, it's not much, cut nails, I can't tell really if it would pass expert opinion. I mean we can't ask Mrs Rattenbury now can we?'

Micklethwaite nodded.

'I found out that the Beacons Lookout was bulldozed flat by the council three days ago. Any evidence has been obliterated. There's just my photos, but the physical evidence has gone'.

'Why are you telling me all this?'

'I wanted to know if you were involved, if you were another guardian angel of the Bishop'.

'Not really'.

'But you had an affair with Percy for three years in the 1970's'.

She looked angry then, and spoke back angrily, then checked herself.

'You know about that?! Who told you that? Felicity I suppose'.

Micklethwaite brought out the photocopy of the *Poole Daily News* and placed it in front of Julia. She shook her head, almost cried then pulled herself together.

'Where did you get this?'

'These photocopies are what Mrs Rattenbury kept. Here's one from the Poole newspaper 1975, it puzzled me at first, but she ringed the death notice in pencil.'

'My lovely Jessica. My sweet Jessica. Still born, but they allowed you to put a death notice in then. My parents lived in Poole, I went there to have the child. She was an evil woman wasn't she?'

'Mrs Rattenbury. Yes, but she didn't try to blackmail you?'

'No. And you know what, if she had I would have said to her Violet, if you blackmail me I'm going to take a long, long knife, the longer the better, and plunge it through your dark evil heart, and it will be a pleasure to do it'.

Julias eyes gleamed as she said that and Micklethwaite had no doubt she meant every word. She was a formidable lady, and Mrs Rattenbury would have been terrified too.

'Why did the affair end?'

Julia Graham looked thoughtful and stared at him.

'I will tell you, but you cannot tell anyone else. You don't know Percy that well of course, only the superficial stuff. After his first wife died, of cancer, Percy, well he realised that as a bishop he was surrounded by young attractive women in his congregation who were smitten with him. He was handsome, virile even, and he knew it. He would invite woman to his rooms for a pray meeting or some such, and soon they were in bed with him. Why not? It was exciting. They might get to marry a bishop, except Percy really wasn't the marrying kind. He was having too much fun seducing young women, I mean he used this method many times and succeeded with me'.

'But after the baby.'

'He lost interest, the baby died, and there were plenty of rich pickings out there.'

He nodded and shrugged.

'Yes well, I've moved on, and no, I was not involved in killing Mrs Rattenbury. But if the Beacons Lookout has been wiped clean you have no proof really do you? So where to now?"

Micklethwaite ruminated out loud.

'If Mrs Rattenbury had survived she probably would have thought it an accident'.

'So I repeat myself, where to now?'

He sighed, he had thought of this as well.

> ‘Back to square one, I know the evidence is thin. I know Mrs Rattenbury wasn’t a nice person and frankly I do not could care much about her, and somehow I don’t think anyone cares about what happened to her, but its become personal Julia. Someone tried to kill me and Felicity in the church. Threw Molotov cocktails at us through the windows. Three of them, That was deliberate’.

Julia looked hard at him.

> ‘I knew there was more to that story as well! You are good at telling lies. Tell me’.
>
> ‘I don’t know who it was. Felicity was not in the church and described a man, a tall man running away’.
>
> ‘She didn’t see him?’
>
> ‘It was night and she was frightened, we collided, she lost her scarf then, you heard that story’.

Julia tapped the desk again, looking to find an escape from the web of information that Micklethwaite had deposited on her desk.

> ‘You are vague with the truth. Didn’t you say it was vandals, druggies, hooligans?’

Micklethwaite shrugged.

> ‘Could it have been Martin Strange?’ she suggested
>
> ‘I don’t know. The bishop seems rather unlikely, I mean can you really see Percy at his age running around with molotov cocktails, it seems absurd, but then so does Martin Strange. Anyway I’m seeing Martin tomorrow, he wants a meeting. So maybe I will ask him’.

He gathered up the photos and the 1938 volume off the table. Julia didn’t stop him. She spoke softly.

> ‘Its simple, Gordon. I have to believe its an accident on the cliff.’
>
> ‘And the attack in the church?’
>
> ‘Maybe hooligans, riff-raff, I don’t know…’

He grimaced.

> ‘You see there’s another aspect. Who has been removing the evidence anyway; your records, the archive records, the microfiche of 1938 that was cut out. You didn’t know that, well someone has gone to a lot of trouble to protect the bishop’.
>
> ‘You still think it was me?’

She stood up and, added.

‘Maybe it’s Martin, he’s daft enough…’

‘But perhaps someone told him to do these things, perhaps someone ordered him, a messenger from God…?’ suggested Gordon quietly

Julia stared out of the window again, and as Micklethwaite headed to the door she turned, and Gordon saw a look of despair, almost weepy, revealing the secret face that she hid so well.

‘You’re a swine Gordon, why did you have to tell me all this? I was happy today, till you came’.

Chapter 17

The Raven Flies

Friday 3 December

It was a dark and savage day, it really was. The wind from a criss-cross sea was hitting the cliff and and roaring up over the Beacons Lookout in a bad-tempered mood. This was not a good day for a meeting and Micklethwaite could not understand why Martin Strange had picked such a gothic place for a chi-chat, but maybe he had a gothic soul. He felt uneasy when the chaplain talked about a 'revelation', but perhaps he was going to get the real goss behind that church fire. The chaplain was waiting as Mickletwaite pulled up. Dressed in a long black cassock type of thing, and perched on the stile that overlooked the remains of the Beacons carpark, giving an uncanny imitation of a vulture awaiting its prey. The carpark had been taped off, though there was no real need as it had been bulldozed into obliteration.

'Ahh, Gordon, let us walk along here'

Strange indicated the track above the carpark that followed the cliff line for a long way. Micklethwaite did feel wary. The chaplain was carrying a strong walking stick, and lead the way on the clifftop path down into a small gully where there was seat, that faced out into the English Channel. It was very close to the cliff. There was no one else around.

Martin Strange stared into the ocean but hardly saw it. Perhaps he saw into the void.

'What do you think about sin?' he asked Micklethwaite.

'Sin?'

'Yes. The act of disobeying God'.

Micklethwaite waited, and while he waited the wind swirled through the hawthorn trees. Strange turned and looked at Micklethwaite

'You have sinned with Felicity Givens'.

Oh, thought Micklethwaite, coming to the realisation of what Strange was saying, so

that's what this was all about.

> 'Do you deny it? That you have had sexual intimacy with her, a woman I have asked to be my wife'.
>
> 'You have proposed to her?"
>
> 'Yes' he said emphatically.
>
> 'Oh. I didnt know. I thought you just gave her a bible?'
>
> 'But in the Bible were the heartfelt words of my soul, that expressed my desire to her. You must desist from sinning. I command it'.

At that point Strange stood up and he was a big gangly man, with hair tousled in the wind and a fixed intensity in his expression that alarmed Gordon. He tensed and stood up as well which brought them face to face. which seemed to arouse Strange further and he yelled out.

> 'I am her guardian and she is my woman. It's my duty to protect her from evil doers, who will lure her away from the path of righteousness. Sinners who copulate out of the marriage union, must be punished. Will you desist from your foul activities?!'

Micklethwaite was struggling with an answer to get himself out of this ludicrous predicament and run away, and he had no desire to be beaten to death by a religious maniac on the cliffs of Doreeset. But Strange was brewing an overwhelming desire for rigtheousness.

> 'Then I must punish you! I shall smite thee like Jesus smote the money changers!'

With a swing of his walking stick Strange attempted to bash Micklethwaite on the head. Gordon didn't wait to feel the impact, for he knew there would be one, and dodged ineffectively as the stick bashed hard on his shoulder. He threw himself against Strange, and they grappled in confusion for some seconds, each trying to unbalance the other. As they struggled, Micklethwaite managed to get his knee in Martins groin, and for some reason, maybe luck, Micklethwaite got a better footing and tripped Strange over his own legs, and the chaplain fell with big roar backwards over the cliff where his cassock momentarily fluttered like an angry raven.

For one sickening moment Micklethwaite thought that Strange had really gone over the edge, but the chaplain had only rolled down onto another smaller ledge below, and was floundering amongst the steep grasses against a hawthorn bush. Gordon grabbed the chaplains stick and pointed it at him so he could grab it, and by slow degrees hauled the large man back up the seat.

It had been a close-run thing. A tad more momentum and Strange might well have toppled over, following Mrs Rattenbury to an early grave. As it was it the fall had given the chaplain a huge fright and he sat on the grass gasping for air, winded by the fall, and he was probably confused that his enemy had not been thrown over but furthermore had helped him survive. They both stared at each other, Micklethwaite

grasping the stick in case Martin Strange got any more bright ideas and launched another attack. He spoke slowly to the chaplain.

'If you want Felicity, take her. She's yours…'

Here he was passing Felicity on like a piece of luggage, but it did seem to work. Martin nodded, and seemed grateful almost.

'You will leave her be?' he asked.

'I will leave her be'.

'Then we are settled. Help me up, these cliffs they inspire vertigo in me'.

Mikclethwaite tensed as he helped the big man to his feet, half expecting another violent outburst. But the fight in the chaplain seemed to have gone as fast as it arose.

'I need to know one thing Martin. Why did you burn the church of St Peters of the Poor down? Did you throw those molotov cocktails?'

Strange looked puzzled.

'Cocktails? What are they?'

'Not really cocktails, but bottles full of petrol'.

'Is that how the hooligans did it? Why no, why would I do that. There are evil doers everywhere. Every church is a temple to me, like the body is a temple belonging to Christ… No I would not burn down a temple of the Lords. How can you say such a thing'.

He started to brush the grass off his dishevelled cassock, and his breathing steadied. And he asked Micklethwaite again,

'You will leave her be?' he asked.

'I will leave her be'.

'I am at rest now'.

With that he started to walk away leaving Micklethwaite baffled and bewildered by this peculiar man. The wind was howling by the time he got to the carpark, and he saw the chaplains car being driven rapidly away.

It was about five o'clock at his cottage that he parked his mums car and he was barely in the front parlour when there was a knock, and Felicity was standing there. She must have been looking out for him.

'You look a mess Gordon'.

'Thanks. I havn't got much hair either. I was struggling on a cliff for my existence with a member of your clergy'.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Martin Strange tried to murder me, or at least punish me, for copulating with his future wife'.

Felicity looked incredulous

‘What me?’

‘He thinks he made a marriage proposal to you’.

‘He did not. Nonensense, that Bible? Ridiculous. I told him I wasn’t interested’.

‘Well tell him again, because he hasn’t got the hint yet’.

‘Oh sorry Gordon. He is odd. How did he know about us?’

‘Julia maybe? Anyway, I’m not to touch you further anyway, according to Martin. You are booked up’.

Felicity just shook her head in disbelief and then started into a strange short giggle.

‘This is silly.’

‘Maybe, but it’s deadly serious for him and was life and death for me. But now I’m alive again I can see the funny side. Now, what can I do for you?’

He slumped in the lounge chair, with his thoughts torn about by too much wind and fright.

‘Oh, well Percy wants us to meet him, this evening, for a pre-christmas drink in the Sulphur Room. You know the underground hot pool. To thank us he said for all our work. He does that every year to most of his staff, well the ones he likes anyway’.

‘Well he likes your bottom. Pats it enough’.

She shrugged.

‘It’s Percy’s way’.

‘Well my nerves should have recovered by this evening, and frankly I could do with a drink ot two’.

‘Ok, eight o’clock, meet here, we can walk down.’

The sooner he left for New Zealand the better, but there was still more to come on this most gothic day…

Chapter 18

The Bishop Raises a Toast

Tuesday 3 December

Felicity was on his doorstep at 8 pm, the streetlights casting a ghastly light on the row of cottages. He noticed she looked ill at ease, as if she had been crying. They walked towards the cloister.

'Are you ok?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'I can't get over Martin trying to kill you. He must be mad. I wish all this was over. What will you say to the bishop?'.

'Maybe I will ask him if he sent Martin to attack me at St Peters of the Poor church, and if he says no, then it must have been hooligans. End of story I suppose. Except for all the loose ends'.

She stared at him.

'Loose ends?"

'Who gave Mrs Rattenbury the poisoned cake'.

'Oh'.

'And does anybody else know that he was a blackshirt'.

'Oh'.

They reached the door and it was unlocked, and the lights were on. The steps were steep and the bishop smiled at them as they came down. The suphur pool was full and the water exciting rapidly down the water race.

'Welcome to my little drinkers den, welcome my boy. Now try this, a special Madeira from Madeira. Bought it myself, ten years ago.'

The bishop was standing by his drinks cabinet and handed Felicity and Gordon a

generous tumble, ain an elegant sherry glass.

'You have worked hard, both of you and it has been difficult, I wanted to thank you both. A dark sherry, but not bad'.

'Cheers Your Grace' said Gordon

'Cheers to both. Christmas is coming, and I do like Christmas. I'm a sentimentalist at heart'.

'Percy' Gordon ventured 'yesterday Martin asked me to meet him on the Becaons Lookout and then attacked me with his walking stick'.

'Gracious! Why?'

''I don't know really, he said I was a sinner, and he was acting as a guardian angel'.

'Ahhh, but he is able if misguided'.

The bishop downed his glass and poured another.

'I think it was Martin that set St Peters of the Poor on fire whilst I was in it'.

'Bad business that, but pray, why would my chaplain do that?'

'On the cliff, he said he was acting under your instructions. To kill me'.

'Ahhh. How extraordinary, but he obviously didn't succeed'.

'I jumped out of the way'.

'Good judgement'.

Micklethwaite realised that the bishop was not surprised by all this information, and in fact seemed tipsy.

'I believe he threw the molotov cocktails at me through the church windows.…'

'Did you see him?'

'No, but Felicity saw a dark man running'.

Felicity and Percy glanced at each other and Gordon noticed.

'Not under my instructions. Perhaps he got carried away!'

The bishop produced a gun from his pocket, a large military looking gun.

'Old army weapon you see Gordon. Sorry about this',

Felicity called out.

'Percy!'

'Hush dear…, now Gordon I believe you know something, something that should by necessity stay secret.'

Gordon stared at the gun. In the gloomy light it looked real and menacing.

‘Who told you I knew?’

‘A little birdie’.

Micklethwaite was delaying here, anything really to give him more time.

‘I found Mrs Rattenburys secret file under her table, with the photos from 1938. She had been blackmailing Bert Pringle, and I guessed she was blackmailing you because you had been a blackshirt?’

Micklethwaite looked at Felicity who was rooted to the spot and stayed staring at Percy and Micklethwaite. He stumbled onto his explanation.

‘It all started with Mrs Rattenbury’s death. At the Beacons carpark there was a line of red stones, which looked as if they were designed for the car to follow, and the bolts had been hacksawed. The police never seemed to notice. Being a bishop gives you privileges Percy.’

The bishop laughed.

‘Yes indeed. Masterful plan eh, not entirely my own you realise, but yes, pretty in its conception I think. And best of all my fellows, it worked!’

He was now on his third sherry, and Micklethwaite tried to keep the conversation going

‘Violet deserved to die?”

The bishop sighed.

‘Yes, that evil woman. The blackshirts was a youthful folly Gordon. Sponsored by the Anglican dioecese though, so I was not the only young man to take the wrong side’.

‘But the photos would deny your chance of being Archbishop of Canterbury’.

‘Absolutely. Tut, tut, imagine the tabloids. Archbishop a Fascist, no it wouldn’t do, and the race was as good as won. I was the favoured candidate, but a whiff of scandal and…. the Bishop of Leeds would win, dreadful thought. He doesn’t even believe in God’.

There was a pause as the water down the millrace roared in an angry spate, and seemed to increase in intensity. The bishop had finished his third glass of sherry, and the gun wandered all over the place. Micklethwaite pondered his chances of grabbing it, but perhaps Percy had read his mind because suddenly he steadied himself and the pistol was pointing at him directly.

‘You are not really going to shoot me Percy?’

‘I might have to old boy. We are so close to winning the prize, who else suspects apart from you? Just you, and Felicity of course. Something has to be done. I’ve gone too far. Sorry my dear’.

‘We?’

‘A figure of speech, I couldn’t have it without my guardian angels you know. They looked after me well, and are going to be handsomely rewarded’.

The bishop loved talking and wasn’t averse to a bit of explanation and kept glancing at Felicity as well. Micklethwaite noticed over the bishops shoulders that the timing switch only had five minutes to go.

‘So Gordon time for a swim’.

Felicity broke out.

‘Percy!”

‘A swim, yes if you could strip down, to your underwear of course. A midnight swim, raiding the bishops wine cellar, that sort of thing’.

‘You won’t get away with this Percy…’ protested Micklethwaite.

‘’Why not? Your body will get mangled like the poor girl ten years. Terrible business. Come on, in the water you go’.

Micklethwaite started undressing and Felicity looked extremely shocked. He shivered in his undies even though the Sulphur Room was humid. Perhaps it was a premonition, a shiver of death. Suddenly the bishop seemed to remember something and said.

‘Now, Felicity I will deal with you later’.

‘Percy this isn’t, I mean… you aren’t doing…’.

‘Hush dear!’

Micklethwaite was watching the timing switch which had only two minutes to go. He temporised.

‘My body would look would look suspicious with bullet holes’.

‘Gosh, I will not need to shoot you Gordon. I think the water will do the work, all that rain you know, it’s hurtling down the race. No one can swim against that current. Get down onto that ledge please’.

That meant stepping down onto the first step, up to his knees in the water. It was then that Micklethwaite saw the bishop pick up a large stick from beside the cupboard and realised that one blow could knock him backwards into the water race, and in the force of the current he would be gone. The switch was ticking on its last minute. If the bishop only realised he only had to reach to reach back and adjust it some more, but he was focussed on getting Gordon into the mill pond and the job done. Politely of course.

‘Now the lower step, hurry up please’.

Felicity pleaded.

‘Shut up Felicity! Now step off Gordon! Into the water you go’.

The bishop came very close to the pond, with his stick waving about and pointing the gun at him. The switch was ticking on the last painfully slow seconds. This gave Micklethwaite a small chance, a very small chance. God that minute hand was slow! Felicity screamed.

'Percy, please don't shoot!'

Suddenly the light switched off, the room went black, and in a half second Micklethwaite jumped backwards, but the Bishop fired twice into the pitch black night. The two cracks that bellowed in the Sulphur Room made it seem like the cathedral above them was itself falling appart.

Chapter 19

Moral questions at Midnight

Friday 3 December

The roar of the water race filled the room and the bishop fumbled behind him till he found the light switch.

He turned it on, and there was nobody there. Except Felicity, who was still frozen on the same spot, her hands grasping her distorted face. Where had Gordon gone? The bishop grabbed the half bottle of sherry, took a swig to gain more courage, and was muttering as he stepped towards the mill pond. He came right up to the edge and peered in, and gently spoke to her.

> 'You know I believe he's gone, hah. Vanished. A toast to you, yes a toast, so easy peasy…'

But at that exact moment Micklethwaites pale hand reached out from the steps where he had been crouched, squatting on the lowest step with his chest and neck in water, but out of sight, and hanging onto one of the ring bolts set in the wall. He yanked at the Bishops leg, who was completely taken by surprise, lost his balance, and toppled forward over Micklethwaite into the pond with an inarticulate yell. Felicity just watched open mouthed and started to run to the edge.

With all his remaining strength Micklethwaite pulled himself out of the mill pond onto the concrete floor, and gasped and shivered like a stranded fish. He grabbed Felicity who was perilously poised to jumping as well .

> 'Percy!' she yelled 'oh God he's gone'.

Micklethwaite held onto her, worried that she might fall. She exclaimed.

> 'Let me go, oh no, he's over there!'

In the dim light Gordon saw the bishop hanging onto the side of the water race but he had no chance. He was partly upside down and the force of water was great, and so like a whale he was stuck in the narrow race till the water pushed him out like a cork from a bottle and into the tunnels maw. He gurgled something, there was a thrash

of arms. Then gone.

Silence. Felicity sobbed something incomprehensibly.

'Oh he's gone, gone, what have I done…'

She turned to Gordon and beat her fists upon his chest as if he was to blame, which in a sense he was. He embraced her and she shiverd in his arms'

'It's okay…'

'No its not okay, the bishop? He's dead isnt he?'

Gordon was about to explain that the bishop had been sucked down the mill race and even if he had survived the tunnel he woulld have been forced against the grill, and drowned there. But he said nothing. He got dressed and pulled his clothes over his wet body. He picked up the gun that had fallen on the floor. Felt it in his hand and wondered aloud: how strange that two people were trying to kill him in one day.

Felicity had slumped on the stone stairs with her head cradled in her hands, moaning and rocking slightly. He sat beside her and took hold of her shoulders to comofrt her.

'It's all alright, its over now'.

But her reaction was odd, and she started to cry and pushed him away

'You don't understand, you don't understand!' she wailed.

He didn't undertsand, and obviously she was in terrible shock, and Mickethwaite could grasp that. He was in shock too but they couldnt stay here much longer.

For quite a while they sat in silence. Micklethwaite flicked the timer on again and was just about to pick up the port bottle when a thought occurred to him. He took out his sodden handkerchief and used that to grab the bottle and put it back on the shelf. Then he took the bishops sherry glass, a beautiful 18th centrury thing, and dropped it on the stone floor where it broke into several pieces. Felicity looked up, and was disturbed.

'Why did you do that? That's priceless!? It's going to be awful, telling the police, oh I can't get his shout out of my head'.

She beat her head with her fists, like it was the worst earworm someone could have — which it probably was.

'We don't tell them'.

'What?'

'We don't tell the police, they won't believe us anyway. Just too incredible. They will think we tried to kill him not the other way round, I mean bishops don't murder right?'

'We can't do that?'

‘We have to. Look, the bishop comes down for a tipple he often does. He slips falls into the sulphur pool and gets washed down the mill race. An accident, it was bound to happen. Its happened before, to that girl. The bottle of sherry has his fingerprints on it, and so does his glass, if they want to check. Its dark, its late, he gets tipsy, maybe the light switch goes off and in his state he blunders into the mill pond’.

‘We can’t do this’ she pleaded.

He repeated his message.

‘We have to Felicity. He murderd Mrs Rattenbury because she was blackmailing him. Ordered Martin Strange to kill me, and then tried to kill me again! I mean who is going to believe this stuff about a bishop?’

He tried to explain to her, which in context of the confines of a dungeon like room, with water roaring and rushing all around them and in the thick sticky odorous humidity was hopeless. But this might be the best chance he would get.

‘We will be dragged through a huge trial, just to clear my name and your name. And we know we are not guilty of anything, but the Press will smear us with endless innuendos, and it will go on for years, maybe your entire lifetime. I will be the man who murdered the Bishop. You will be the woman with the man that murdered the bishop. Can’t you see that? Our motives will be twisted upside down and back to front. They won’t care about the truth, and will drag our relationship into the open, expose every aspect of our mundane lives… but remember, we are innocent. We’ve done nothing but survive’.

He paused.

‘The media will damn us, and that will be another type of murder. The murder of the living’.

Felicity shook her head as if to reject these ideas.

‘All we have to do is keep silent. You are good at that, so am I. Events might turn against us, but I doubt it. I think we will be ignored. Trust me’.

‘The gun. I didn’t think it was loaded…’

‘I will keep that, then chuck it into the river tonight. They will find the bishops body and that will be enough. Why would they look for a gun anyway, why would a bishop carry a gun?’

He gave a grim inward smile.

‘I didn’t think it was loaded.’

She stood up unsteadily and looked at him with disbelief.

‘This is too horrible, grotesque’.

‘Hey, I’m just trying to stay alive Felicity. I’ve had two men try to kill me

today, which must be some sort of record you know? He might have killed you as well'

'No, he would never do that!'

'With me gone, you are the only person who could give him away. Martin will never betray him.'

'After all I've done for him? No I don't believe it…'

But her voice tailed away into the gloom as if perhaps now, after all the terrible events that had just happened, perhaps she could possibly believe it.

'Wasn't he going to deal with you later?'

'He didn't mean that, …'

'Men are evil arnt they?'

He grabbed hold of her shoulders and hugged her.

'Look I know it's a terrible shock. But I don't want to get charged with a murder thanks. This is the only way out. It will work. Trust me. You've trusted me before, now trust me again'.

She gradually accepted this hug and put her arms around him although there was no feeling or pressure in them. His body was just a prop to keep her upright. He felt a wave of emotion come over him, but hell, he was still going to back to New Zealand soon and get out of this madhouse.

'Let's go'.

They walked carefully up the stairs and at the front door, he flicked off the switch with his handkerchief and then used the handkerchief again to open open the latch and peered into the dark cloister. There did not seem to be anyone around. His brain seemed to be operating on extra adrenalin,

'We must leave without being seen. It's crucial. You go first. If you see anyone don't talk, cover your face, and hurry by. Go to your cottage. I will give you five minutes then follow'

She nodded.

'You will come and see me?"

'In about half an hour. I have to get rid of the gun. With any luck we wont be seen'.

It was such a miserable December night that there was a more than reasonable chance they would not be seen, and it was only a few minutes to the cottage.

'Even the devil isnt out on a night like this' he remarked.

The courtyard was empty, and the cloister heavily in shade..

'You go home. Pull the curtains before you turn on the light. Tell me if you

see anyone, just say you were getting some fresh air'.

He watched Felicity walk under the dark cloisters, then across the lane to her cottage. He saw no one. He waited for a while, then he was careful not to latch the door behind him. He could see that his door could be a problem if he supposed the bishop would latch it after him, so why was it left open? He decided that he had to leave the access door open. followed her route and turned further along the lane to his cottage. He waited in the porch shadow to see if anyone was about, but at 9 pm decent folk were in bed or watching the telly. Only the indecent were out avoiding a murder rap.

The Chaucester River flowed around the back of the cottages and following a pathway beside his cottage he reached the river, dark and swift. If the grill hadnt been there then the bishop would have been thrust into the river only 100 metres away. There was no one around. It was 11 pm, and looking around he threw two rocks in the river that were on the pathway, then glancing around, threw the gun into the water. It wasn't perfect of course, but ten the murder wasn't perfect either. Percy well knew he had been murdered, but hopefully would never tell his side of the story. It might work.

Chapter 20

Funeral of an Archbishop

Saturday 11 December

Bishops get buried on a Saturday, he hadn't realised that. It was a big deal and everyone came. Seven bishops from around the country, inclduding the Archbishop of York. Clergy so thick on the ground they had to position more pews for them, and even the Home Secretary came down. Since bishops don't usually die suddenly, and certainly not in accidents, it was a very big event. The cathedral was full so all they could find were some seats right at back, stuck behind pillars, so he really couldn't see much of the action of the service.

He was right about one thing. They were ignored. It took some time for people to realise the bishop was missing. Martin Strange raised the alarm, and the Bishops housekeeper remarked that the bishops bed hadnt been slept in. The police descended on the Cathedral on Saturday morning in droves, asking questions of everyone. Felicity had been coached by Micklethwaite and said that she had no idea where the bishop was, she knew nothing. It was Bert Pringle who sensibly noticed the Sulphur Room key was missing, and that sent a whole lot of police clumping down the dark stairs to the mill pond. It was obvious what had happened. They found the broken glass, and the opened bottle of port,. Bert was called on to to show the police where the grill was and thats when they got navy frogmen and the bishops thoroughly mangled body was extracted.

The police investigation was unusally circumspect, and careful. Gossips were happy to gossip but peple did not want to believe that the bishop had committed suicide, especially after Mrs Rattenburys horrible death. The Cathedral trust board were worried about this, and were relieved when the police found the bishops fingerprints alll over the half drunk bottle and broken glass, so it looked like an unfortunate accident. Another unfortunate accident. The autopsy proved drowning was the cause of death, and the bishops body was released quickly. Especially when the Home Secretary made a comment or two I that regard.

The service was huge and no mention, or hint was made of a possible suicide, although it was never completely out of the back peoples minds. But no one mentioned it publicly. The police never asked Gordon a single question at all. He was

ignored, and for that he was pleased.

Martin Strange seemed to gain in importance and status, and as the bishops chaplain he was asked by numerous reporters about his role and his thoughts on the bishops untimely death. He enjoyed this position.

> 'A true tragedy. He was most likely to be the Archbishop of Canterbury and would have made a fine gain for the church. A spiritual renewal I believe that that would have emboldened the church into a new era'.

Okay, that was over the top, but the reporters loved the angle of the archbishop, and to their pleasure everyone seemed to agree that Percival Somerville was a shoe-in. Several speakers at the funeral alluded to this, and it was even on the national television news. For once, Chaucester City was in the headlines.

Micklethwhaite sat at the back of the cathedral with Bert Pringle. That Friday night, after dumping the gun, he went round to Felicity, and consoled her, and again tried to emphasise that she must not say anything. That she knew nothing at all. They did not make love, though he was quite keen, but she didn't seem interested. The shock had put her into a sort of trance of grief, almost catatonic, and although he tried to explain the bishop motives, and that he was a murderous madman she was not having a bar of it.

> 'You are wrong Gordon. He was just trying to scare you.'

> 'Well he bloody succeeded. How can you say that? You were there. I could have ended up in the mill race.'

She turned to him and said coldly.

> 'Perhaps it would have been better that way. You have brought nothing but trouble and grief to me'.

He went home and since then had not spoken to her. In the cathedral Bert was muttering to him under his breath,

> 'It's a funny do aint it, don't you think Jordan? You know, when you add it up, first old lady Rottenbury died off the cliff, then that Martin Strange attacked you. Same bloody cliff you know? Then the bishop got drunk and drowned in the mill race, I mean its bloody suspicious aint it? And what about that poisioned cake eh? That killed my dog. Who sent that to me?'

Micklethwaite muttered back.

> 'I think the cake was meant for Mrs Rattenbury'.

> 'Ohh, yer reckon, but who sent it?'

> 'Maybe Martin Strange, the bishops chaplain. He didn't like her much…'

> 'Orrr, well that I could believe that' said Bert knowingly. 'He was right strange that one, good name for him too'.

Most pews in the cathedral had been donated and had little brass plaques on them.

Where he sat wih Albert there was a plaque saying 'Donated by G. Givens' He pointed it out to Bert.

> 'Nah, that's no coincidence, that's Felicitys father, you know he ran the mechanics shop down Arkwright Road. Died a few years ago of course, great tales he had of the war. He was a commando you know, raiding French ports and stuff. Little short chap, but tough as nails… Felicity worked with him in the family business. Worshipped him, yer know. I remember when I first saw her, fifteen or something, covered in grease and oil, what a laugh now eh? Oops here's the body coming, better stand up. Poor Percy eh? So close…'

They both stood up and Micklethwaite knew exactly what Bert was saying. Another month and this corpse would have been the new Archbishop of Canterbury in charge of 110 million anglicans world wide.

There was a gathering, a sort of wake, after the service and the Anglicans are so good at this sort of thing. Tea and cakes, tea and sympathy. An army of elderly ladies had been marshalled into the hall next door. There was even some wine, and the conversation became lively. Micklethwaite was surprised at this; they were allowed wine in a funeral?

At this point, Felicity came quietly up to him.

> 'I'm sorry Gordon, I was a beast saying those things'.
>
> 'I deserved them. You were in shock'.
>
> 'Yes, I suppose so, still am. But that doesn't excuse my behaviour. Forgive me. I will visit soon. I have a surprise for you'.
>
> 'You're not pregnant?'

She looked shocked,

> 'It's a joke' Micklethwaite explained.
>
> 'Oh you Kiwis have a weird sense of humour'.
>
> 'Who's pregant?'

Julia Graham was suddenly standing there.

> 'Not me anyway'.

Felicity looked at the Archdeacon carefully

> 'Julia are you drunk?'
>
> 'Maybe. It's a wake isnt it? This is some of Percy's best wine you know'.
>
> 'You are drunk!' Felicity exclaimed.

Julia then suddenly became sober, and stared into the bottom of the wine glass.

'Even an archdeacon is not perfect. I'm just grieving for the bastard. I loved him really, despite alll he did to me'.

It took a moment for Micklethwaite to realise she was talking about the bishop. She continued in her business-like way.

'Perhaps it's for the best. Drowning like that… Percy was a bit of a ladies man really. The truth is I think he had a girl on the side already. I heard him talk on the phone, speaking in that cosy tone men have…'.

Julia laughed. It seemed strained but real.

'Believe me I know when Percy is talking to a fancy lady…'

This was too much for Fellcity.

'Its wrong too talk like that. We should be respectful of the dead. Percy was a good man really. I won't have it!'

She walked away, and Bert guffawed.

'Poor Filly. It's bad for her. She was fond of the bish you know'.

Julia Graham seemed rather unrepentent, and sighed.

'I better apologise I suppose, but she didn't know Percy like I knew him'.

Later Micklethwaite went to the archive room but there was no one was there. It was a grim room even at the best of time, with its shelves of books and dusty files, but it was also soothing in an antquarian sort of way. A place you could hide away in. A place where nothing much happened, or ever would happen. It suited shy reiring people, for it drew them in, absorbed them, but it was never cosy. Even when he and Felicity made some banter it was never a cosy place.

So much had happened since he arrived, a grotesque series of events, not exactly his fault, but perhaps if he hadnt been so nosy or so wrapt up in his own detective mode none of this would have happened. The bishop would be an archbishop. Mrs Rattenbury would be dead. Hooligans burnt down the church. Martin was just very strange, and sort of lovelorn. Maybe Felicity and Martin would get togetherafter all? That was a weird idea, but not implausible. There was a whole parallel universal of possibilities that had they been allowed to continue might have produced a happy ending for everyone.

Except for Daisy the dog. Micklethwaite went outside the archive room, and stood looking a long time at Mrs Rattenbury's door.

If the bishop was trying to kill Mrs Rattenbury, which seemed unlikely, but he said he was, why would he bother with a poisoned cake? And why deliver it on the very day that he was planning to shove Mrs Rattenbury off the cliff? It didn't make sense. He couldn't see the bishop slaving away over a hot oven to make a cake, so were there two people trying to kill Mrs Rattenbury on the same day? Somewhat excessive, and rather ridiculous. He had a sudden thought: maybe the courier parcel was not delivered late, but too early. It was a back-up plan gone wrong, in case the

carpark plan failed.

Poor Daisy. Micklethwaite shut the archive door behind him and wandered down the darkening lane to his cottage. Just for once it wasn't raining and he could even spot Venus peering over the left buttress of the cathedral. He stared at it for a while, and wondered if Venus were really the star of Bethlehem that fateful night. A cat was sitting on the stone step as he approached and got up to rub himself all over Gordon. Also on the step was a small wrapped parcel, addressed to him.

When he opened it was a cellophane bag of almond biscuits, neatly tied up with a pink ribbon, from the 'Chaucester Cake Factory'. There was a note from Felicity:

> 'Hope you enjoy them they are called *ricciarelli* in Italian. Sorry but I didn't make them, I wish I had, they look delicious. I giving some to Julia too. I will miss you. Love Filly'.

Odd that she spelt her name 'filly', like a fresh young horse. He looked at the almond treats without touching them, but the smell was delicious. The bag said 'Chaucester Cake Factory', so it was genuine. He liked sweet things.

Chapter 21

‘An Archbishop needs a Wife’

Sunday 12 December

The cathedral bells tolled at nine am as Micklethwaite walked back to the Cathedral offices, with a small unopened parcel tucked under his arm. The morning was chill and clear. Not being especially religious, Micklethwaite generally treated Sunday as his outing day, but this Sunday he was on a mission. He had been thinking all night and he realised the time had come to push the envelope, so to speak.

Last night he kept thinking again and again of that phrase that had popped up so many times in the last few weeeks: a bishop needs a wife. Who said that? Julia, yes of course, and Felicity, also, but you can only have one wife at a time can’t you? Why should this matter now? The bishop was dead and no one would know now, or care, and the bishops past was all complete, and he should be safe from posthumous recriminations. But Micklethwaite did like a certain tidiness.

He knew Julia started work early on Sunday and so walked over to the Cathedral offices and at the archdeacons door he heard voices within. He didn’t knock. Julia and Felicity were sitting together and on the table beside Julia was another little packet of *ricciarelli,* also tied up with a pink ribbon. They seemed surprised.

‘You are supposed to knock Gordon’.

Felicity looked perturbed. He sat down univited, and this surprised Julia even more.

‘You’ve something to tell us Gordon?’

‘Yes. I’ve been slow, been silly I suppose. Every time I worked something out, someone was always ahead of me. Someone manipulating, running little rings around me. I guess I knew it all the time but it had never occurred to me, to put the jigs back into the jigsaw so to speak. I kept re-arranging the pieces so they never would fit’.

‘What on earth are you talking about Gordon? I have to go soon. Sunday is my busy day’.

‘I hand it to you Felicity. Taking me home the night the church of St Peters of the Poor burnt down, was a brilliant scheme. Talk about distracting me, how to distract a man eh? Offer him sex, it works every time. I really thought you were a lonely virgin, and I was helping you out, but I think I was more the virgin than you were’.

There was no big man running away was there? There was just you, who followed me with your molotov cocktails stashed in the back the boot of the car. They stank of petrol. It was a simple scheme. Get rid of Gordon. A popular pastime it seeems in this cathedral precinct’.

Felicity asked with annoyance.

‘Are you mad Gordon?’

Felicity just looked without expression.

‘No, I’m finally sane. Felicity, your dad was a commando in the war. He knew how to make Molotov cocktails and I suppose, he told you, in one of his war exploits, since you were so close to him’.

Julia was sitting up and listening very intently. Felciicity stood up.

‘Don’t go Felicity, this is the interesting bit. When did the bishop promise to marry you?’

Julia was plainly surprised.

‘The bishop asked you to marry him, Felicity?! When? You have been seeing him?’

Felicity stammered, standing up as if caught up in some great emotion.

‘He asked me to marry him… He meant it. He promised me’.

Julia was gazing between Felicity and Micklethwaite as this extraordinary tableau took place. She interrupted.

‘But Felicity, he asked me to marry him, three weeks ago’.

‘No!’ she cried out.

Julia looked apologetic.

‘Yes. Three weeks ago. You know what he said to me? An archbishop needs a wife he said, otherwise it looks odd’.

‘No! You? I don’t believe it! Yet I always knew you were a rival. He is such a weak man!’

Felicity started to walk up and down and squeezed her hands in a great agitation, like draining the water out of a dish cloth

‘One year ago he asked me… and I accepted. After all I’ve done for him. Looked after him, solved all his problems and issues, protected him. He trusted me. He said I was his guardian angel’.

Julia said numbly.

'Felicity, he didn't need a wife, a bishop doesn't need a wife, he has as many women as he can handle'.

'He needed me, oh yes he really needed me!'

Julia shook her head as if not in agreement with this.

'Well I turned the bastard down. He talks about his guardian angels but the only soul he ever protected was his own. He was using me, as he used everyone. He was using you Felicity'

'I cannot believe that.'

Micklethwaite jumped into the conversation.

'But Felicity a year ago, the bishop already had a wife, and you were the last person to see Linda alive'.

Now something gleamed in Felicitys eyes, a vehemence, even a passion.

'What a disgusting women, drunk and drowned in her own vomit!'

Micklethwaite stroked his chin.

'Maybe, but maybe not quite dead enough I fancy. Perhaps with some assistance, and the bishop would have been so grateful, and permanently in your debt'.

The flood gates were opened. Julia glanced at Gordon as if to say 'what are you saying'. Felicity burst out.

'I loved Percy but all the problems he had with that stupid little wife. Linda what's her name. Drunk, taking pills, having men stay over, a slut… a hopeless wife for a bishop'.

'You found her you said' prompted Gordon.

'She was drunk in bed, as usual. You could see the sheets were disturbed, oh the bishop talked about wanting to divorce her, but that's not easy for a man in his position, so…. She was stupified with alcohol with some vomit on the sheets. I was so angry with her. I simply finished the job'.

'You killed her' Julia asked

Felicity defended herself.

'She was half dead anyway, bottles of gin everywhere. All I did was slosh a little more alcohol in her mouth, she gurgled it down, and then put a pillow over that her mouth and sat on it. It was so simple'.

'Did your father teach you that trick to… '

Julia looked astonished. Felicity looked triumphant.

'My father was a very brave man. You know, the police never asked me

much at all, instead they searched for Linda's lover man, who they found. Accused him of killing her, which he denied. Accidental death the coroner said. So that was that'.

She looked defiant, and even pleased. Mickletwaite spoke carefully.

'You know it puzzled me because I could not see the bishop throwing molotov cocktails around, or sending Mrs Rattenbury over the cliff. Someone had to plan these things. The bishop was too hopeless for that, and too cowardly. He had to have an accomplice'.

Felicity burst out.

'More that that! I was doing everything.'

'The master mind?' suggested Julia.

'Why not? Can't a woman be a mastermind if she knows what she wants?'

Julia said thoughtfully.

'What about Mrs Rattenbury?'

Felicity turned to Julia, and seemed almost proud to show off her skill.

'Everything was going so well until she started blackmailing Percy, that horrid woman. It was a shock, Percy was terrified. You know as well as I do that Percy was bound to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury, everyone said so. So I devised this plan to send her off the cliff. He took her out there anyway, so it could be made to look natural. I laid the red pebbles out and half cut the bolts. We rehearsed once beforehand, Percy and I, but I wasn't sure if Percy had the nerve for it, but he played his part pretty well in the end.'

'But why was Martin Strange out there as well'.

'I don't know. Just a coincidence I suppose. It could have ruined everything'.

'The cake was your backup plan, but it was delivered a day early?'

Felicity looked apologetic.

'That was a mistake. We had to get rid of her, urgently, and if the bishop lost his nerve, so yes'.

'So when you ran out after you heard the Bishop had gone over the cliff you were actually trying to grab the cake back?'

'But it was gone, and then Julia was here, there was no time to get it back… I got it later of course'.

Micklethwaite questioned her further.

'It was you that was busy destroying all the evidence of volume 1938 that could have damaged Percys reputation. Cutting holes in the microfiche, and then I came along, and spoiled the show. Something had to be done about

me. It was your plan I think'.

Felicity did not look at him. Julia was baffled, and protested.

'I have no idea what you guys are talking about.'

'On Friday evening, last week, the bishop invited me and Felicity for drinks in in the Suphur Room. Felicity had arranged the meeting, and they had concocted a plan. I was the last person who knew that the bishop had been a black shirt, the last person who could block the archbishops appointment. The bishop pulled out a gun, and wanted me to go for a swim. It would have been a pretty good murder too, an accident. Man goes swimming in hot pool and gets swept to death, but things went wrong. The lights went out and he fired twice. Missed, and things went wrong. The bishop went down the plughole instead…'

Felicity said something strange, almost a moan, and then beat her fists against the stone wall of the office.

'Oh God, I was numb. I don't know where the gun came from, Percy just waved it about, he never told me, I never knew it was loaded. It wasn't supposed to be like that, it wasn't to end like that… '

Micklethwaite asked quietly.

'Then how was it supposed to end?'

She didn't seem to hear and clasped her hands, pulling anxiously at them.

'I've lost everything now. I'm sorry Gordon now, I started to get feelings for you, I didn't mean to… well, what can I say? I was confused. We had come too far, I was torn. I thought maybe we could scare you…'

'That worked!'

Julia interposed.

'Oh god, you're going to tell me that the bishops death wasn't accidental?'

Micklethwaite gave a grim smile.

'Actually it was accidental. I was supposed to die instead'.

Felicity started sobbing quietly and muttered so low in tone that they struggled to hear.

'The bishop didn't do anything himself, he was too weak. I had to do his dirty work for him. Work out all his plans, and little schemes. He said he loved me. I believed him, and I never saw much love between him and his wife. Then Mrs Rattenbury found the black shirt photo, and started to blackmail the bishop.'

Micklethwaite turned to her.

'You know Felicity that Mrs Rattenbury's death would have been the perfect

murder. It was something that came right out of the Foul Play Club. Mrs Rattenbury would also have believed it was an accident, if she survived, which obviously she didn't'.

Felciity looked up with strange queer look of triumph. A gleam of professional pride.

'It was clever wasn't it? Quite clever.'

'So was the Sulphur Room too, it might have worked'.

Felicity seemed to agree,

'But Percy didn't stick to the plan. He had his own ideas…'

Her voice trailed off.

'Everythings lost now, there's just emptiness. When I saw Percy die, there is just emptiness'.

Julia was just shaking her head in disbelief.

'Okay guys, this is hard to take in. I always thought the bishops death was an accident, an incredible accident'.

Felicity was sobbing in the corner and Julia was staring hard at her, bewildered by the revelations. After a long silence, Felicity stood up and walked over to the door. She pused, pulling herself togather when there were only pieces left.

'I don't care any more. Everythings lost, but I know one thing. I was the proper wife for an archbishop. I always was, and I always will be'.

Chapter 22

The Notice is Torn Off

Sunday 12 December

Julia Graham held her head in her hands, then spoke slowly.

> 'That's a lot to take in ten minutes. Hold on Gordon'.

She lifted the phone and rang someone.

> 'Martin? Julia here. Something urgent has come up. Can you take the service? Thanks'.

She put down the phone and looked at Micklethwaite.

> 'I suppose I owe you an apology, since I didn't really believe you the other day. Oh God! So if I'm right Felicity tried to murder you twice?'

Gordon held up the small package of almond biscuits *ricciarelli.* Julia questioned him with disbelief.

> 'No! Are those poisoned, like the cake she made?'
>
> 'I'm not sure. Maybe cyanide, that has an almond flavour doesn't it? They do have Chaucester Baking Factory on them, I mean I've eaten their cakes before and never died. I tell you what, let's test them'.

He cut up some pieces of the biscuits on a plate with his penknife, careful not to touch them, and carefully opened the window and slid the biscuits out onto the courtyard. Two pigeons immediately descended on the tasty morsels.

> 'The pigeons will test them for us eh'.

Gordon gave an uncomfortable laugh and looked at Julia who was lost in another world, head down and sunk in private thoughts.

> 'She killed the bishops second wife, and Mrs Rattenbury, and was trying to kill you, I don't know what to think anymore. Did you kill the bishop?'

'It was more a matter of survival'.

Those hours in the underground Sulphur Room now seemed to have occurred on another planet, to another person.

'At the time I thought Felicity was on my side, I did not realise she had set me up'.

Suddenly Julia snapped back upright, and the old Julia returned, back in business mode, thrusting forward.

'But why did she do that? For love?'.

'Something more I think, something better. Status, acceptance…'

Julia straightened her hair, already well groomed. She stood up and tsarted to walk around the sunlit room, matching her words to her paces.

'Women are stupid Gordon when it comes to men. I don't know if men realise that, perhaps they do. They play us. We wait and wait, and hope and hope, and they string us along. Poor Felicity, a spinster for life. Well that's my fate I suppose. We love too blindly, irrationally, and are mostly far too loyal'.

Micklethwaite had first felt terrible when the bishop died, because after all he would have made a very good archbishop. But later he could see that he was clearly using everyone. It seemed doubtful he would really have married Felicity, especially since he had asked Julia.

Julia asked in desperation.

'Was Martin Strange involved in any way?'

'No. I don't think so. I thought he was, many, many times, but every time I came to the conclusion he was just peculiar. He was just strange'.

'Boy, you can say that again'.

Micklethwaite said teasingly.

'Maybe he'll become the next bishop? There's a vacancy now'.

'God spare me that. Actually I might apply. It's about time someone else got a turn. They accept women bishops now in Canada and New Zealand, so why not here? I mean why stop there. I could go for archbishop!'

He grinned.

'Don't you need a husband for that. An ornament'.

'Hah!.

She peered out of the window at the courtyard, where some weak sun had arrived. She saw something.

'Gordon come over here, look'.

He came over. Two pigeons were flapping on the ground, scruffling around and not

looking happy. One pigeon was completely still. Two others were pecking at the crumbs. Micklethwaite shook his head in despair.

‘Bloody hell. They were poisoned. That means she did try and kill me three times. Felicity must have bought the real biscuits, doctored them, and then sealed the packets again. That is pure revenge…’

Julia looked puzzled.

‘I can see why she wanted to murder you, after all you killed the bishop, maybe not deliberately but still. You destroyed her dreams, but why me? I havn’t harmed her in any way’.

‘You were a rival. A potential rival. Didn’t the bishop pat your bum when Felicity was there?’

‘He patted every female bum, but I see your point. Percy and me have history… but she wouldn’t have got away with this?! The police would test the biscuits?’

‘What do they say? Revenge is a dish best served cold. She had lost everything, every dream. She would have seen herself on the bishops arm, gracious at the garden parties, talking to Prime Ministers, heads of state from Africa, being the perfect wife, a fantasy of course, but it could have happened. It nearly did. It’s not every womans dream, but it was hers and she made it happen’.

Julia still watched the dying, writhing pigeons. Then said dismissively, coldly.

‘I never liked pigeons anyway. Most eloquent Gordon, but what do we do about her? Do we tell the police?’

Micklethwaite picked up the second packet of almond *riciarelli*.

‘We have the other packet still, I’ll leave it with her. As a hint. It’s all we can do’.

‘Will she eat them?’

‘At least she knows the poison works…’

‘That’s a very bad joke. We should stop her. It’s my Christian duty really, to save life.’

But Julia said that in an unconvincing voice, and Micklethwaite was not convinced.

‘This is taking your role a bit too far Julia, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know what to think anymore’.

Micklethwaite too was exhausted.

‘Me neither, for myself, I prefer the quiet life. Sorry, I’m off back to New Zealand’.

He walked to the door and just as he opened it, looked back thoughtfully

‘You know Julia. You would make a good bishop’.

‘Thank you, Gordon’.

Then she made a joke, quite a good one for her, that made Micklethwaite laugh before he closed the door.

‘By the way, you’re right of course, a lady bishop does need a husband. Otherwise it looks odd. You’re not looking for a wife are you?’

The archive door was still open and he saw Felicity sitting in her chair staring at nothing. He didn’t speak to her but walked in and quietly deposited the unopened biscuits on her desk. She looked up at him with eyes that had a profound emptiness in them.

‘You know what to do Felicity. They worked on the pigeons’.

He wanted to say something else but couldn’t think of anything. No clever ending.

Her eyes followed Micklethwaite out of the room and when he looked back (as he could not resist looking back) the last he saw of Felicity Givens was that she was staring at the packet of *riccerrelli* on her desk.

He pulled on his coat and just across the hallway glanced at the noticeboard, and saw it was the schedule for the Foul Play Club, with the next meeting due on Monday. Micklethwaite ripped it off and screwed it up. The club was not going to meet again. Ever.

Notes

All the characters portrayed in this book are fictional and are not based on any living person.

The town and cathedral of Chaucester is completely imaginary and not meant to represent any particular cathedral diocese.