

PARASITES II

EVOLUTION



by

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Parasites II: Evolution
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Monday



*If one could conclude as to the nature of the Creator
from the study of his creation
it would appear that God has an inordinate fondness
for stars and beetles.*

J.B.S. Haldane

(British geneticist 1892-1964)



Staring down at the decaying corpse, Shelley Carpenter was unable to stop the bitter flood that rose to the back of her throat. It was not the sight of the devastated body that caused this sudden feeling of nausea, but the memories that the decomposing cadaver evoked.

Quickly rising up from the crouching position she had taken beside the body, she turned around and hurried up the steep, grassy bank. At the top, she flung open the flaps of the forensic tent and stepped out into the fresh air. Having pushed the face protector away from her mouth, she dragged deep gulps of winter air into her aching lungs.

The wicked February wind, which whipped unhindered across the barren fields, struck Shelley like a hard slap full in the face, causing her eyes to water, hiding the tears already flowing down her cheeks.

“You feeling okay?” Detective Inspector Colin Granger placed a comforting arm around the forensic practitioner's shoulders.

“Yeah. I'll be fine,” she told him. “I just need a couple of minutes to sort myself out.”

They were both silent for while, Shelley slowly getting her breath back and the detective watching with concern on his face.

“I'm sorry I had to bring you out here,” he eventually said. “I'd heard that you were taking things easy for a while, office work, administration, that sort of thing.” He removed his hand from Shelley's shoulder, took a step back and surveyed the bleak Lincolnshire landscape. “But I thought it was important for you to see this.”

Turning to face the policeman, Shelley wiped a trembling hand over her dampened face and tried to muster a smile. “To tell you the truth, I was going a little stir crazy stuck inside the office all day,” she confided in him. “I needed to get back to my real work, you know?”

Granger nodded.

“But I didn't need *this*.” She pointed towards the polyester canopy of the shelter, towards the dead woman lying face down in a few inches of dirty water at the bottom of the drainage dyke. “I thought this business had all ended months ago.”

After the woman's body had been discovered, and the extent of her injuries known, Granger had immediately contacted the authorities in Edenbridge. Having read about the events that had taken place in that town a year ago, and having seen the forensic reports of the injuries suffered by the victims there, he had realised there was a connection with the body found here.

He had been given Shelley's name and had persuaded her to drop everything and come up to Lincolnshire. He had cajoled her into getting involved with the investigation, forced her to face the horrors of her past again.

Now he felt guilty for pushing so hard, for being the one responsible for the distress she was experiencing.

Shuffling his feet as if unsure what to say next, Granger stared down at his mud splattered shoes.

“I heard what happened to Pinner.” His voice reflected the uncertainty he felt in bringing the subject up. “I knew him from way back. We were stationed together for a while. He was a good copper. What happened to him was . . .” He removed a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and turned it over in his hands as though deciding whether to have a smoke or not. He sighed, opened the pack. “Well, his death was tragic to say the least.”

Placing a cigarette in his mouth, he thumbed the wheel of his Zippo. The blue flame struggled against the cutting wind and he had to shield it with one hand while igniting the end of the cigarette.

After releasing a long stream of smoke, which was instantly whipped up and away by the strong

breeze, he looked over at the forensic practitioner. "Sorry. Do you?"

He held the packet out.

"No. Thanks anyway."

"I shouldn't really," he told her. "Doctor's told me to pack up, but it's habit. To be honest, I don't even enjoy the things any more." Taking another long draw from the cigarette he threw the remainder down onto the ground.

"Were you and Pinner close?" he suddenly asked.

Shelley looked up at him. She wondered how much Granger knew about the circumstances of Pinner's death, or the history she and the detective had shared. Even now, after months of trying to forget, or at least repress, the horrors of that time, the pain still bubbled away inside her, lying just below the surface, exposed and raw, ready to erupt at any minute. Lately, she had felt that she'd managed to keep her feelings under control, each new day allowing her to focus a little less on the agony of her loss, on the horror she had been part of. Now though, in these circumstances, she could feel her resolve weakening, was struggling to suppress the grief and anger that threatened to break free at any moment.

"For a while we were really close," she replied, her voice almost cracking as she turned away to stare at the desolate landscape.

Granger could see the sadness in her face and was once again engulfed by a wave of guilt. He'd heard rumours that the pair had carried on an affair for a time and he wondered whether it had been Pinner's death, more than the horrific circumstances she had been embroiled in, that had caused Shelley's eventual breakdown.

"As you know, the force hasn't released all the details," he said. "But from what I've heard, it must have been one hell of a nightmare."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she replied. Then, as if talking to herself she added,

"Pinner was more than a good friend to me. It was horrible the way he died. I just couldn't handle things afterwards. It's taken me a long time to come to terms with what happened to him, what we all went through."

She drew in another deep breath and thought about the time she and Pinner had been lovers, the time she'd imagined there was the chance of a real future together. How wrong could she have been? At one stage she even considered that they would get back together, patch up their relationship. But Pinner's death had brought a sudden end to all of her dreams.

Looking over at the forensic tent, the memories flooded through Shelley's mind in rapid procession. Down at the bottom of the ditch, staring at the dead woman, she had been unable to stop her thoughts from replaying the terrible way Pinner had suffered, the devastation brought about by the parasites inside his body, the utter destruction the creatures had caused.

She had tried hard to keep the images away, but had failed miserably.

Thinking about it again, tears began to flow once more.

"I'm really sorry to put you through all this," Granger apologised again. "Perhaps we should call it a day. Get out of this cold."

Shuddering against the icy blast, Shelley shook her head. "No. I need to do this. Come on, lets get back to work."

Taking in a deep breath, she stood erect and pulled down her face protector. "Let's get on with it," she said.

Then she turned and headed back to the tent.

Entering the shelter once more, she carefully climbed back down the steep bank. At one point she slipped, but managed to get a grip on the long grass, stopping herself from tumbling head first into

the black water at the bottom.

The body had been found two days ago. The owner of the land had spent the day ploughing the field, ready for planting in the spring. Answering a call of nature, the farmer had stopped his tractor at the edge of the field and had walked over to the ditch. There he had intended to empty his bladder, but instead he had made the gruesome discovery.

The corpse had been lying undiscovered for some time. The smell of the rotting flesh had obviously attracted several curious animals and a host of insects. The woman lay face down in the dirty water, her scant clothing tattered and torn. The remains were not pleasant to view and the posthumous damage done to the wrecked cadaver made investigating the circumstances of the death difficult. Removing a camera from her bag, Shelley moving carefully around the scene. Then she started taking photographs.

Colin Granger watched her from above. His forensic team, headed by Senior Forensic Pathologist Mark Pendleton, had already conducted a thorough investigation, but he needed to hear Shelley's opinion; had to be sure that he had done the right thing by calling her in. Despite his feeling of guilt, he needed her to focus on the job at hand, required her input on whether this was indeed another victim of the beetles that had ravaged Edenbridge.

"Male or female?" the policeman asked, trying to get Shelley's mind back on her work.

"Female," she replied.

"Age?"

"Hard to say, but I would guess between, say, thirty-five and fifty."

"That's a big spread," the detective said.

"It's the best I can do for now," Shelley replied as she continued to take photographs.

"How long has she been down there?"

Shelley studied the body. The areas of flesh that were not damaged had turned a deep purple with a marbled red and deep blue veined pattern within. This was not the usual kind of discolouration she would have expected to see. Normally, from around forty-eight hours from the time of death, the skin would take on a greenish hue, deepening and darkening as the timespan increased. Eventually the flesh would take on a blackish appearance. It was true that hypostasis could cause the skin to turn a deep, dark red, but the colouring on this corpse was different to anything she had seen before. "Shelley?"

Looking up at Granger she shook her head. "I don't know. There's something that doesn't look right here. I can't put my finger on it, but the colour of the corpse is not what I would normally expect to see."

Granger nodded. "Pendleton told me the same thing. He's going to look into it when he performs the post-mortem back in the lab."

Returning her attention to the dead woman, Shelley snapped more pictures of the area, tilting and angling the camera to cover every angle.

Granger remained at the top of the ditch looking down at her. He watched her working, noting her slight reluctance at getting too close to the remains. Studying her reaction to the body, he wondered just what impact the past year had really had on Shelley's life. By all accounts she had been an excellent investigator, professional and thorough, now though, he could see that she was just going through the motions, that her enthusiasm for the work had diminished. Perhaps the events in Edenbridge had stolen something from her that she would never be able to regain, he considered. Despite the physical evidence of the emotional turmoil she had faced, and the strain of all that had happened to her over recent months, the detective found Shelley an attractive woman. Tall, slim, with long, brown hair and emerald green eyes, it was easy for him to understand why Sebastian Pinner had become involved with her. As he continued to watch her work, he contemplated whether there was anyone special in her life now, someone who could, perhaps, help chase the spectres of her past away.

Not that *he* was interested in any romantic relationship with the woman. Granger was happily married, *really* happily married, and had never felt the need to stray outside that relationship for either sexual gratification or emotional support. His wife, Susan, was far more than just his spouse, far more than just the mother of his son. She was his lover, his confidant and his best friend as well. Some days, when the world appeared to be against him, it seemed that she was his only friend. “Apart from the missing hand, most of the injuries were undoubtedly inflicted posthumously.” Shelley's voice broke into the detective's reverie.

“I presume you discovered more evidence for suspecting that this is connected with what happened in Edenbridge?” she added.

Focusing back on the work, the detective replied, “Yes, we have.” He paused, before saying, “The body is exactly as we found it. After Pendleton and his team had finished their investigation, we reconstructed the scene precisely so that you could see it for yourself. We thought it important that you come to your own conclusions and were not influenced by us. We need to be sure about what we are dealing with here.”

Shelley took a small, tentative step closer to the body and then crouched down, placing the camera on top of the equipment bag by her side. She studied the cadaver for some time before saying, “The body is badly damaged, but a lot of it is posthumous. I can't see anything unusual, nothing more than you would expect from this location and environment.”

“You'll need to turn her over,” Granger told her. “All the major damage is underneath.”

Shelley did not want to touch the body, let alone grasp it to turn it over. Although she had told the detective that she wanted to get back to normal, continue with her career, get on with her real work, she had lied. Since her breakdown, she had not been able to look at a corpse without the nightmares returning to haunt her. Even after all this time, her nights were still punctuated by vivid dreams and she found it impossible to venture outside in the dark alone. When Granger had called her, explaining what had been found, she had felt physically sick. This was quickly followed by a strong refusal to believe that the discovery of the woman's body had any connection to the events that had taken place over a year ago. It seemed impossible, incomprehensible, that after all this time there was fresh evidence indicating that those evil insects were still alive.

“I can ask Pendleton to give you a hand, if that'll help.”

Continuing to stare at the body, Shelley noted the effects caused by the decay, the wildlife and the few inches of stagnant water on the pale, bloated flesh. Images of Penelope Swift's body, discovered by Adam McHendry on the floor of the bathroom in the small cottage in Craymore Downey, flashed through her mind.

“*Shelley?*”

She looked up at the detective as though awakening from a trance. Again there was a great sadness in her eyes.

“You don't have to do this,” Granger reminded her, his voice soft, his concern genuine.

“Yes, I do,” she said, annoyed at her own cowardice. “Pendleton's help would be good, thanks.”

While she waited for assistance to arrive, Shelley's thoughts betrayed her yet again. She pictured the look in Pinner's eyes as he had writhed on the floor of the restaurant, his body being ravaged by the parasitic larvae inside. Echoes of his screams ricocheted through her mind, seeming so real that they appeared to be carried to her on the back of the cold, blustery wind.

She had prayed that time would eventually lessen the hurt, would gradually eradicate the bad dreams that plagued her day and night. And for a while it had. But the sight of the mutilated and pillaged body before her burst the damn that was holding back all of those terrible memories and they came flooding through.

Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply through her nose, trying to push those unwanted thoughts away, trying to clear her mind. Trying to concentrate on nothing at all.

“Ready?”

So absorbed had she been in controlling her emotions, that she had not heard Mark Pendleton climb down into the ditch to stand next to her. He was a tall man, with dark, close cropped hair. His muscular frame looked as though it had been developed by regular visits to the gym and his eyes burned a bright blue. When Shelley looked up, he had a broad smile on his face, allowing her full view of his perfectly straight and evenly white teeth.

They must have cost him a fortune, she thought.

"I'll grab the shoulders," Pendleton told her. "You take the legs. On the count of three, we'll roll her over onto her back."

Shelley nodded.

"I'll just warn you, though," he added. "It's not a pretty sight."

"Don't worry about me," she told him, sounding much braver than she actually felt. "I've had to deal with a lot worse in the last year or so."

Together, the two forensic scientists placed their hands under the body and lifted. There was a squelching, slurping sound as the viscous ditch water seeped into the vacated space below. Then they pushed up and over, allowing the body to fall onto its back.

Shelley took an involuntary step away from the corpse, a stagger that almost toppled her. Pendleton placed a firm hand on her arm, holding her steady.

"I did warn you," he said.

There was a gaping wound in the woman's torso running from the chest to the lower abdomen. Cracked and splintered ribs protruded from the torn body. The clothes were shredded, as was the exposed flesh. The inside of the corpse was empty, hollow, as though the entrails had been scooped out. The flesh of the woman's face had been ripped away, leaving exposed bone in places. Flaps of torn meat dangled from her scalp. Her eye sockets were empty.

"Oh, God," Shelley moaned and began to slump forward as beads of perspiration erupted on her skin.

Grabbing hold of her as she swayed on her feet, Pendleton held Shelley steady, saving her from collapsing into the dirty water. He pulled her close to him, taking her weight as she sagged against his body. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her upright, their faces only inches away from each other.

Shelley's eyes were firmly closed, her body trembling against Pendleton's.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Slowly, as her legs regained their strength, Shelley stood up straight. Her breathing came in hard gulps below the face protector.

"I need to get out of here," she said, panic evident in her voice. "I need to get into the fresh air."

Pendleton helped her up the bank and Granger opened the flaps of the tent. Once more, Shelley burst into the fresh air, flinging off her protective face gear, ripping open her bunny suit.

She leant, doubled over, hands on knees, dragging huge amounts of the cold air into her lungs. She coughed, almost vomited, but managed to swallow back down the rising bile.

"I'm sorry, Shelley," Granger said. "We shouldn't have let you . . ."

Shelley held up her hand. Her face was ghostly pale, the outstretched limb quivered. "I'm fine," she blurted. "It was just the shock. It brought back so many bad memories."

"So you think I was right to contact you?" the detective asked.

Lowering her hand back to her knee, still doubled over and panting for air, Shelley could only nod. Granger fell silent.

Pendleton, who had also exited the tent now, walked over to them. "We'll get the body down to the lab," he told the detective. "Then we can carry on with the investigation."

Granger nodded, then stepped closer to Shelley.

"Come on," he said to her, placing his hand on her shoulder. "I think we both could do with a strong drink."



After Colin Granger and Shelley Carpenter had left the scene, Mark Pendleton strolled back to his car to get out of the bitter wind. He removed his bunny suit, Wellington boots and face protector, dropping them into the boot of the vehicle, then he pulled on his work shoes and wax jacket. Once inside the car, he watched his team lift the cadaver out of the ditch, tag it and bag it, and then load it into the back of a white van. The remains would now be taken to the lab for further investigation.

As the rear of the van disappeared into the distance, Pendleton reached over to the passenger seat and removed his Nikon camera from his work bag. Holding it close to him, he pressed the playback button.

The first image he had taken of the dead woman was displayed on the 3.2 inch, LCD screen. He studied it for a while, then pressed the button to move onto the next picture.

For nearly two hours he remained seated in his car looking at the photographs of the devastated body of the woman. Studying each image carefully, he used the zoom button to view in greater detail the more gory areas of the damage done. One by one, through the entire sequence of shots, he spent time taking in as much minutiae of the composed scenes as possible, before finally moving on to the next picture. All the while a peculiarly fixed smile decorated his face.

There were well over two hundred photographs of the cadaver stored on the 64 GB memory card inserted inside the camera, far more than was required for the investigation. But Pendleton had taken them not only for evidence, but for his own personal collection also.

Eventually, he turned the camera off and returned it to the holdall. Then he leant back against the headrest and closed his eyes. He could still see the images of the woman's torn body in his mind's eye, could still define the details of the damage done to her torso.

His smile widened.

His desire flared.

From the vehicle's glove compartment, he withdrew a small, black, leather pouch. He unzipped it and spread it open on the passenger seat. Inside were two items, a clear plastic bag, half full of white powder, and a small silver mustard spoon. Dipping the spoon into the bag, he lifted out a delicate mound of cocaine. Holding it under one nostril, while pushing closed the other with a finger tip, he inhaled the drug, sniffing it up eagerly. Then he repeated the process, this time snorting with the other nostril.

He closed his eyes again, his heart beat increasing and a warm sensation flowing through his body. Instantly, the images in his mind became more detailed, more vivid; real in a way that made him draw in his breath with ecstasy. He reached out his hand as though trying to touch the woman's flesh and his fingers rested on the leather covering of the steering wheel. He caressed the soft hide, gripped and relaxed his hand on the vehicle's wheel as though squeezing and pressing the wonderfully injured body of the dead woman.

He moaned aloud as his erection hardened.



On entering the small Baptist church, the Reverend Douglas Allen was overwhelmed by the usual mix of powerful emotions that he always experienced in a house of God. This chapel, and others he had been present in, always produced within him an unpleasant combination of guilt - as though he was trespassing, as though he should not be there at all – and a deep sense of shame. Both emotions served to emphasised his fraudulent lifestyle.

He had experienced these feelings for most of his life, since promising to dedicate his life to preaching the Lord's words in fact, and over the years, they had continued to grow in strength and severity. As time had drifted endlessly by, they had become a relentless reminder of his own weakness and cowardice.

Wearily sitting down in one of the plastic chairs at the front of the hall, he glanced up at the six feet tall wooden cross suspended from the thick beams of the ceiling and shook his head in self loathing. He knew he should feel something more than emptiness inside him, knew that he should be able to bow his head and talk to God, openly and frankly, but there was not a single nugget of devotion in his heart, not one iota of belief that his words would be heard, that his prayers would ever be answered.

In truth, Douglas was a faithless man and had always been the same. He was a weak man also, he readily admitted, and this weakness had led him into a sham of an existence. Although he considered that there must be others within all denominations of Christianity who, like himself, just went through the motions, said their prayers, recited the Gospels, constantly feigned a passion and understanding that they just didn't believe, it did not make him feel any better about his life, did not make his *being* seem any more worthwhile. He had wasted the years he had been given: wasted them not only on the falsehood of his chosen profession (he could not even call it a vocation, feeling, as he did, no urge, no predisposition to follow the Baptist faith), but also on a loveless marriage.

Sighing deeply, Douglas removed a small bottle of gin from his jacket pocket, unscrewed the lid and took a swig. The alcohol took his breath away, but he knew that soon it would take his thoughts, his worries, his guilt and his shame, away also. He laughed, shook his head once more, imagined how pathetic a figure he must look at the moment. An adulterating, faithless preacher seeking solace from a bottle of Gordon's finest, sitting in a house of God, where he should be experiencing all the comfort and succour he could ever desire.

Holding up the bottle, saluting the suspended cross, he said, "Here's to you, God," and took another gulp of the clear liquid.

Although only late afternoon, and outside darkness just beginning to fall, Douglas felt extremely weary. The pressure of the burden of his worries seemed unbearable lately and he struggled to keep his thoughts composed, his spirits lifted. As a second hit of gin took effect, his eyelids increased in weight and he fought hard to keep his eyes from closing, to keep his mind alert. Not an experienced drinker (although he was gaining more expertise on a daily basis) the effects of the alcohol flowing through his bloodstream were quick. His vision soon began to blur, his mind to become fuzzy, mushy. He re-capped the bottle and placed it back in his pocket, knowing full well that much more would have a devastating effect on him, would render him useless for the rest of the day.

And that would do me no good at all, he thought to himself, would only bring the sanctimonious wrath of Daphne heavily upon me.

Visualising his wife's reaction should he arrive back home inebriated and unintelligible, caused a wry smile to spread across his face, although the smirk was swiftly extinguished when he imagined her anger should that situation ever arise. There was no getting away from it, he was afraid of

Daphne; scared shitless in fact.

Pushing away these fantasies, he slowly rose up from the chair and stood on unsteady legs. "Right then," he said. "Let's have a go at the sermon for Sunday."

Feeling tipsy and a little clumsy, he made his way to the lectern on the elevated platform at the front of the church hall and opened the bible that sat on top to Ephesians 5. Pushing on a pair of wire-frame spectacles, the pastor leaned over the book and studied the text. For several seconds he remained stationary while the letters on the pages slowly refrained from swirling around, to settle into a semblance of legible words. Then he lifted his head and looked out at the rows of empty seats, as though seeing the congregation in front of him, all eyes fixed upon him, all waiting with baited breath to hear his words of wisdom and truth, but not one of them knowing the secrets that he possessed.

"Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

He paused for second, as though formulating a plan, and then withdrew the gin bottle and took another swing. He liked the buzz he now felt, was becoming accustomed to the sharp taste, the dryness at the back of his throat.

Thrusting the bottle out in front of him in a threatening gesture towards the imagined crowd, he continued. "But *fornication* and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks."

Swaying slightly and with his voice raised far louder than necessary in the soulless church, he continued, "For this you know, that *no fornicator*." He nodded, thrusting the bottle out even further. "*FORNICATOR*," he repeated loudly, then, "unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."

Slamming the bible shut, he pushed himself away from the lectern and headed back to the seats, collapsing into the nearest chair. His head lolled back as though his neck was unable to carry the weight.

"Fornication," he muttered to himself. "Linda taught me to love again." He laughed, lifted his hand and stared at the bottle he held. "Christ, she even taught me to drink. No way I'll inherit the kingdom of Christ and God now." This time he roared with laughter as though this thought was the funniest thing in the world.

Soon a wave of self-pity, mixed with the guilt that was already plaguing him, washed away the mirth and Douglas took another long pull at the gin. Then he screwed the top back on the bottle and placed it on the floor by his feet. Rubbing his hands over his tired face, he tried to think when his life had become so complicated, when he had suddenly found the burden of his living almost too hard to bear.

He remembered when he had first come to Dunsfleet, nearly fifteen years ago now. He had been much younger then, more able to control the dark emotions that ravaged through him. He and his wife had been welcomed into the community, the friendliness of the villagers a pleasant change after the uncongenial attitude of the city people they had left behind. He had considered that his life would become easier in the countryside; less people to fool, a smaller congregation to preach to. But he had been wrong. If anything, the quieter life, the reduced duties that needed to be carry out, just emphasised to him what a waste his life was, what a fraud he really had become. And, although the congregation was smaller than he was used to in the city, the faith of the people who visited his small church seemed far greater. He found himself constantly having to communicate about a God he had absolutely no belief in.

It wore him down, mentally and physically, but he dared not confess his true feelings.

Then, out of the blue, his life took an unexpected turn; one that was both a blessing and an added burden at the same time.

Having endured a marriage that was loveless and cold, having suffered the ordeal of having a wife who thought sex was something to be tolerated only very occasionally (and *only* at her say-so) and who considered that any sign of affection was also a sign of weakness, Linda Cartwright had come to him, offering him an oasis in the vast desert of his terrible existence; offering him the promise of love and companionship, things he had rarely known before.

The intensity of their relationship and the rapid rate in which it had developed, surprised them both. It was as if destiny had brought them together; had lured Linda to Dunsfleet, to the small Baptist chapel, with the sole purpose of bringing the two of them together.

For a while he was happy, deliriously so, but gradually a deep, gnawing feeling of guilt came over him. He had become a sinner, a fornicator. Every Sunday, when he stood in the church, it became increasingly harder for him to face the congregation, to tell them not to sin, to remind them that God's way was the only way. He would look upon them, their eyes resting on him, wanting and expecting him to guide them in their search for His love, and his heart would sink.

Not only were they placing their hopes and faith in someone who possessed no religious conviction at all, but they were seeking moral guidance from someone who was cheating on his wife, was shagging one of their number.

Sometimes the pressure he felt was so great that he could not think straight, wanted nothing more than to hide away from the world, but then he would see Linda again and all the guilt, the despair and the self-loathing would be washed away by the pure lust that coursed through him. Nothing else would matter but the pleasure of their bodies joining. There was no room for misery in his heart when he held Linda in his arms.

The sound of chair legs scrapping across the floorboards broke Douglas from his thoughts and caused him to look around the chapel. At the end of the row of seats, one of the chairs was now standing askew, as if some careless person had bumped into it.

He frowned, glanced around the church again.

All was quiet, all was still.

Standing up, he walked towards a door that led out of the main church hall and through to a corridor, giving access to three small rooms at the back of the building. As he neared this doorway another scrapping sound drew his attention. This time, when he turned in the direction of the sound, he actually saw the chair move as if by magic, without anyone being nearby.

He rubbed his face with his hands once more, tried to wipe the hazy alcohol blur from his vision.

Christ, I've had more than I thought!

He felt the beginnings of a laugh rising, but the sound of another chair scrapping across the hard wooden floor soon stopped it from surfacing.

"Hello?" He walked down the row of seats heading for the ones that were now disturbed and scattered. His legs were weak, not just from the gin flowing in his blood, but from a small knot of anxiety that was forming inside him.

Approaching the uneven seating, he suddenly saw a glimmer of light moving low to the floor.

Heading towards him, the apparition passed between two rows of chairs. Unable to make out just what it was, Douglas tried to focus his vision, tried to concentrate his mind on the unusual sight. It was as though he was watching a transparent object, progressing slowly underwater. There was a shimmering sensation, a transient shape, ill-defined, but present nonetheless, an outline of light and colour, but no *real* circumscribed shape or form.

For a moment he thought his eyes were deceiving him and he closed them tight, counted to three and then slowly opened them up again. The vision was still present and appeared much closer to him now.

The atmosphere within the church had swiftly changed also and a coldness now washed over him. He shivered against the drop in temperature, wondered if the temperamental heating system had suddenly failed.

With his mind reeling, Douglas was aware not only of the sudden plunge in temperature, but also of something far sinister. There was an electrifying tension in the air, a sense of the supernatural, a feeling that encouraged fear to bubble up inside him. Without thinking through his actions, he turned and rushed back towards the lectern. He did not dare to look behind him to see if he was being followed by . . . *what?*

What had been there among the chairs, causing them to move out of line?

He had no idea, could not decide if what he had witnessed was even real or just a part of his inebriated imagination. As he ran down the aisle of the church, he lifted his head to gaze upon the cross, suspended mid-air above, but his vision of the sign of Christ was strangely hampered and, when he looked more closely, he could see that the imposing wooden structure was swinging slightly as though being pushed by a strong wind.

“What the hell is going on?” Douglas asked the empty hall. “What is happening to me?”

He felt like crying now and tears did begin to flow. He wiped the moisture from his face as he stared at the undulating cross, but still he could not focus sharply upon it. The same watery, shimmering shadow he had witness back among the scattered seats obscured the outline of cross. Aware that something evil, menacing, was with him in the church and that there was no one else that could offer help, the pastor fell to his knees and began to utter feeble words of prayer. Forsaking his secular beliefs, he found himself hoping that there *was* a God and that *He* was listening to every word, was willing to offer the protection that Douglas had often preached to others about.

As he spoke quickly and softly, eyes closed, hands clasped together, he suddenly heard the beating of wings. The sound was so loud that it was as if he'd been caught in the midst of a flock of huge birds. He covered his ears with shaking hands, lowered his head so that his forehead touched the cold floor. Sure that something was descending upon him, that something was about crush him or destroy him, he whimpered with fright, waiting for the fatal blow.

But the thrumming of wings abated as suddenly as it had started and the room fell silent once again. Slowly, the pastor lifted his head. The cross had now ceased its swinging, its shape now clear, defined. The coldness, that chilled him only moments ago, had lifted, to be replaced by the welcomed warmth of the central heating.

Shakily rising from his kneeling position, his mood began to lighten, his fear diminishing slightly. He looked around the church, at the familiar surroundings, at the non-threatening objects that occupied the hall.

All seem normal once more.

Perhaps it *was* the drink after all, he thought. He'd been hitting the bottle hard lately, maybe his body was finally rebelling against the abuse it had received.

Feeling foolish now for his hysterical actions, Douglas walked cautiously back down towards the main doors. On reaching the disordered chairs, he stopped and straightened them out, lined them all up neatly as they once were.

Then he headed outside.

In the cold winter air, he shivered again, but smiled at how stupid he'd been, how foolish he was to have allowed himself to get so easily spooked. He had learned a lesson today and he promised himself that he would go easy on the gin in future. If things became too bad for him he would try not to rely so heavily on alcohol to help him out. Perhaps he would be better to try to talk to Linda, to confide in her all the doubts and worries that he felt.

Perhaps.

As he was about to lock the door he cursed, remembering that he had left the bottle of gin on the floor near the front row of seats. It would not be good for one of his congregation to ask questions as to how it got there.

Pushing the door open again, he went back inside the chapel. Although hesitant at first, he was

relieved to see that everything remained as it should be, the chairs neatly lined up as he had left them. With his heart beating faster than usual, he quickly found the bottle, picked it up and headed back down the aisle, returning to the main exit. He had nearly made it outside again, had almost convinced himself that he had imagined the whole scary episode, when a sudden, spine-tingling shriek came from deep within the building. Feeling far more fear than he had ever done in his miserable life before, the Reverend Douglas Allen turned around and fled for home.