

The

CHRIST KILLER

New York

Brandan S.S. Bourne

The City is his hunting ground.

The Son of God his target.

***To my family and friends for helping me write this,
sorry for not showing you the pen.***

Book one

Captor

'When you open the curtains you let existence in, when you go out the door you're in it.

Unknown

The containment of Altrap

Late Thursday Afternoon

2nd December

Below the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge

CNN News Editor Calim Porter had contacted John Altrap earlier setting him up with a small news cameo. Altrap knew freelance reporting wasn't the securest journalistic work to have in New York, but on the flip side he'd often console himself knowing that New York was the place to be for cameo news reports, anything can happen and when it does, it's usually good.

A Few hours later Altrap wasn't sure this was one such occasion, as he readied himself on a rickety little rowing boat, bobbing briskly up and down in New York's cold, choppy bay. His camera and sound men also found it hard and were giving the shifty-looking boat owner, Venton, some stern looks. Times were now hard for Venton, formerly a demolition expert then sea captain before his alcoholism got out of control. Altrap spread his feet a little wider to anchor himself in the rocking, weather-beaten, twenty-foot small boat. The four men on-board looked tiny compared to the giant mammals not far from them, shepherded by three NY Coastguard vessels.

'At around noon today this female sperm whale and her calf, seen here, swam up the main shipping lane under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, here in New York. They have since then been swimming aimlessly around the bay, causing havoc with the commercial freight ships. Males of the species have been known to travel to northern latitudes below the Ice Edge in summer months, but this here is unusual, as sperm whales are normally far south in warmer waters this time of year. The female is huge, as you see,' he said,

grimacing. 'And is about fifty feet in length and normally wouldn't venture further than forty degrees latitude in winter, especially not with a calf.'

'It's unclear what caused this. One theory suggests sonar devices on ships, meddle with the whales innate guidance systems. Another theory is that recent underwater Earthquakes in the Caribbean and Haiti have released untold amounts of superheated lava up through the Earth's crust into the Atlantic. This heating of the Gulf Stream is encouraging whales further north off New York City's coast. This, however, is thought outlandish and unlikely as another result of a superheated gulf stream would be major climatic change in the region here, and not observed in New York to date. The probable cause is the female's guidance system is askew through illness and is seeking coastal shelter to recover. The Coastguard vessels here are attempting to coax the mother and calf back out into the bay, at the same time striving to keep the whales out of the shipping lanes. Let's hope they succeed. This is John Altrap reporting from a very small boat in a really windy harbour for CNN news.'

After the camera's light went off, Altrap continued speaking but in a less lively manner. 'I thought we were going on a damn ferry?' He said to the man sitting down in the boat battling with the oars to keep it steady.

Venton's eyes glinted as they looked up at Altrap. 'I told Porter I used to captain the Staten Island ferry, not own one.'

'But you told him you'd bring us out to the whales; you didn't mention this little thing I bet!'

'No, em...' Venton seemed crestfallen. 'I'm sorry about that bit. My tugboats engine seized an hour ago, 'tis all I could manage at short notice.'

'Is that so?' Altrap pointed at the two whales fifteen meters from their tiny boat, 'Those things could have swallowed this thing whole. Get us out of here before they change their

minds or we freeze to death.' Altrap turned away in disgust, trying to smooth down his normally finely groomed hair.

Later on in more comfortable surrounds he'd uploaded his report to the CNN editor's web page, as the three had ate pizza at a local restaurant. Altrap always paid for his friends' food after these cameos, who also doubled as his soundman and cameraman crew. But more so today because they'd listen better, hearing all about his hot new date Sandra. They'd finished up after the big, well deserved, feast and Altrap had told them he'd forward on their fees as usual when CNN paid up.

60th Street, Queens

Thursday Night

On the way home, Altrap parked up and was now sitting in his car on 60th Street, Queens, phoning his new date. 'Sandra, how are you? Listen I just finished up a news report down at the Verrazano Bridge region and it just so happens to be in your neck of the woods as I recall.... Yes, it's going to be first shown at 8 p.m. tonight. ... Yes, famous again for a minute. What you say I pick you up and we go for a walk? ... You're out shopping AGAIN?' ... That's fine; I'll be waiting outside your place. Will be there well before you ... Twenty minute's great. You can wear the three new sweater tops on your curvy upper body to keep warm.... No, no, my roaming hands are staying firmly in the pockets tonight ... can't wait, bye.'

He then quickly replied to a text from Calim Porter, who had congratulated him on his inventive report; all the while smiling down at his phone's touch screen typing the words 'I'll be claiming stuntman allowances on this...' 'JESUS CHRIST!' Altrap shouted jumping in his seat, hearing a thump on his driver window. 'What the hell?'

'Mi... Mi... Mister Altrap, I'm sorry, I didn't me... mean to alarm you,' stuttered a tall, slender man bending down, to peer through his window. 'I have been seeking to ge... get a chance to speak to you alone all day.'

'What do you mean get a chance? Who the hell are you? You frightened the damn life out of me.' Altrap glared out at the nervous looking man wearing bottle thick glasses.

'I apologise again for this, I didn't m... m... mean to startle you there,' the nervous man said, 'but I have information, that has pu... put me in danger. My name is Leslie Hartford, you don't know me, but you know who m...my last employer is.'

Altrap let the window down a few inches. 'Listen you look really well-dressed and all, and are more than likely an okay person, but go phone my DAMN office in the morning if you want to speak to me.'

'You don't understand, I did phone your office in Brooklyn earlier, you have to believe me, I'm at m... m... my wit's end.' He pleaded, 'I was sacked after viewing something I wasn't m... meant to see.'

'Well that'll teach you,' said Altrap starting the engine, rightly spooked now. 'How did you know I was here?' He was getting cross now.

'Your office said you were off doing a report on wh... whales at Verrazano- Narrows. I was so scared staying at my home that I went looking for you. This is my first chance to speak to you alone, please listen.'

'Okay Mr?'

'Leslie Hartford, I am sorry Mr Altrap, I worked as an accountant for Alan Wells.'

'ALAN WELLS? The tycoon, Alan Wells?'

‘Yes. Yes I have camera footage that Alan Wells retrieved from a hotel in Queens after a meeting with a foreign emba...emba....delegate. Who is well known in North Africa, if you get my me... if you get my me.... If you get my drift,’ the man said changing the word. ‘I also have very delicate documents relating to an off-shore bank account, A North African government fund and a golden handshake. If this gets into the news then I’m ho....home and dry. If not I’m a dead ma... ma...’

‘Whoa there, let me see,’ said Altrap, interrupting the man’s stutter, and put his hand out the small gap in his driver window for the documents.

‘I’ve the documents and a laptop with files and emails in a rented vehicle parked up the street, about twenty m... metres...’

Altrap killed the engine and knocked the stuttering man backwards, in his hurry to get out of the car. ‘Okay, let’s go see these documents.’

‘Thank you so m... much, you see I was followed yesterday driving my own car, until I parked up outside the 71st Street Police Precinct on New York Avenue.’

‘Very smart, Leslie,’ said Altrap, eagerly following the man back along the quiet street. ‘You’ll have to show me quickly.’

‘Here wa... wa... wait until you see this,’ Leslie said, opening the sliding side door of the van. Altrap’s eyes lit up, seeing the pile of documents in a large cardboard box. His hand went straight down picking up the laptop sitting next to them. ‘Here, turn tha...’

Newspaper columnist makes headlines

Eastchester, New York

Friday evening

Mo had a busy week and it was unusual he had a Friday night to himself. He had attended a preview night for the latest blockbuster movie to hit the big screen on Thursday and

doted over all the stars promoting it. Saturday would be just as busy at some music video industry awards followed by another staged event across town. So tonight, he was treating himself to some downtime, sitting on a high stool at his quiet local bar in Eastchester. Mo Lovingstock prided himself in obtaining all the right gossip for his column in the New York Times. 'I can't understand, Marty, how celebs are so naive getting caught playing away from home,' said Mo in his lively camp voice.

'So why do you think they do it then, Mo?' Marty said, drying a wine glass with a white towel, happy having his money's worth of gossip from Lovingstock, while he'd the chance.

'Think they see themselves as above all the rules, we mortal 'normals' have to abide by.'

Marty nodded. 'Maybe they tell these awestruck men or women they play offside with, not to kiss and tell, Mo?'

'Umm, I'd say you're right, their lovesick lovers genuinely think at the time, I'll never tell.'

'Yes but the roaming eye has no conscience and discarded playthings soon feel cheap and forgotten, but what gives them the nerve to go then and tell the world their stories, you reckon, Mo?'

'I see them all the time, Marty, those wannabe socialites and hangers on. They even proposition me, and I'm an obese old man. Only for Simon at home making my dinner, I'd be eyeing up all those young star-struck things, be they man or woman. They see me as a way to the stars you know.'

'Wish I could mingle like you, Mo, how you obtain all that juicy stuff is beyond me.'

'I think it's 'cause I pay the stars big bucks to be interviewed. Also, I don't buy their scorned lovers stories. They trust me.'

'Why don't these celebs see what could be coming around the corner though, Mo?' he said, topping up the New York Times columnist's glass of beer.

Lovingstock always loved how Marty mentioned his name in nearly every sentence; it was his chance to feel special. 'I think that it's the added ego that comes with stardom and fame. Let's say, Marty, you've earned millions from making movies, sports or whatever. The average man can only afford one woman and one family. In my case one toy boy, but that's another story.' He smiled to himself. 'Otherwise family security is undermined. But sports stars, the well-known or rich can realistically afford to have three or four families and keep them all secure for the rest of their lives.'

Marty looked puzzled. 'There might be some back-stabbing going on in the background, I'd imagine, Mo!'

'You're right, but being attached to fame gives you a certain celebrity status as well, don't you think?'

'No doubt about that, Mo. I once dated a woman that said she'd made love to a certain film star. Even the thought of that made me more excited.'

'Yes, It is funny how the mind works,' said Mo, briefly thinking about his young toy boy partner, Simon. Mo had been working hard over the last week after attending a red carpet premier in Times Square on Wednesday night also. Tomorrow night would be busy again he thought. 'So, Marty, do you think celebrities should have allowances made for not conforming to normal perceived rules, if they can afford it?'

'It doesn't really say much for family values or role modelling, Mo!'

'But you could call it the capitalism of fame. Money makes money or money makes the right to have many men or women. The average male in America would suddenly be more competitive me thinks,' said Mo, amused at his insight.

'I suppose, they'd be all going around marking their scent on street corners like lions do to their territories, that would be fun,' Marty said.

'Did you see that fellow in the paper with twenty one wives, now that's a religion I'd like be a part of, if I hadn't Simon.'

‘And weren’t gay!’ Marty said.

‘Very funny, Marty, anyway, it’s starting to get late,’ Lovingstock said as he watched a few of the younger ones come in through the door. ‘Time to be popping along, Simon’s making dinner and he’s never happy when I’m late.’

‘Have another top up, Mo, and relax, I’ll serve these here. I’ll be back in a minute.’

Merry travels Eastchester Friday night

Mo sat there a few more minutes, as a few more trendy girls entered the small local bar.

‘Marty, I’m going to head off; you’re not getting back to me for a while, too many on board as it is. Simon won’t be too happy if I fall asleep on him after dinner.’

‘Okay, Mo,’ said Marty, before serving an attractive young brunette, who was now staring at Mo with barely concealed disgust on her face.

‘What do you mean *on* him?’ she blurted out past her shocked, laughing tone.

‘While watching television I meant is all,’ Mo said defensively and looked away quickly, cursing himself for being too loud, as he went on his way.

He strolled leisurely, somewhat merry along the quiet, country-like road, back to his luxurious redecorated one-hundred-year old cottage, only a ten-minute walk away. Simon Jones his long-time partner had ordered him out for a few to relax him while he set about making their Friday evening meal. *I wonder will Simon be wearing his little red apron.* He’d thought earlier while he’d supped his last half of beer. Simon was the much younger of the two and this often disappointed Mo, who knew well that Simon was the real boss, even though Lovingstock was the high profile, big cash earner in the relationship.

The few beers at the small local pub settled him, after his long day in the New York Times Editorial room, cutting and pasting columns for his entertainment pages next morning. Warmed by the beers against the cold night’s air, he grinned to himself as he strolled along on the winding rural road. His mind drifting back and forth now, thinking about his chat with Marty. He didn’t take any notice of a white van parked up the way with

its side, sliding door open. Mo ambled alongside the van, the short red apron suddenly occupying his thoughts again now only two hundred paces from the cottage.

John Tucson was an educated man having qualified with award winning PhD work. He'd then given up his lecturing days and settled down with his beautiful wife, rearing three joy-bringing kids. He'd become a 'Happy happy-out member of Staten Island's community' as he said, because of his love for his lovely Natalie. Finally he was a contented man in his latter employment as school teacher, while running a part-time scuba diving and snorkelling school for kids, from his van parked up on the beach, not far from the Seaside Wildlife Nature Park on Staten.

It was a very different John Tucson intently staring back down the street through the van's passenger mirror. 'Look at that little slob,' he hissed, 'A nobody passing for the average Joe's dumbass link to the stars of the big screen and those awful soaps.' He quietened down, steadying himself, putting out his thin cigar in the van's ashtray. Patiently, he waited a few moments before quietly timing his exit, arriving behind Mo Lovingstock passing the van's open side door.

Lovingstock was lost in his own thoughts and merry stupor as he looked absentmindedly into the van's empty interior, as passers-by do. The man coming stealthily behind crashed the baseball bat into his head, knocking him unconscious and halfway into the van. His shiny patent leather shod feet left dangling outside, were quickly tossed inside. Lovingstock had peered inside that van, little knowing he'd be in there unconscious within seconds. His life changed forever.

Tucson wasn't particularly baseball crazy, but this type of bat was more likely to stun than the thinner, heavier iron bar he'd found behind his cabin at Lake Hopatcong. He'd swung the two of them a few days ago dwelling on his bludgeon, preparing for things to

come. He'd banged up a few trees out back and the leather sofa at the cabin. 'The iron bar might get too messy,' he'd said to himself and opted for the baseball bat.

Tucson looked down at Lovingstock's face, thinking it looked so serene in contrast to its dishevelled body in a heap on the floor. Its lifeless, hefty outline becoming darker as the door slid slowly shut. Merry thoughts of a red apron delightfully tingling the senses inside Lovingstock's head were replaced by a shockingly large, darkening welt on the outside.

Soon Mo's limp body was being driven along the Bronx River Parkway, its driver silently listening to the words on the CD player, 'I have spoken with the tongue of angels.

I have held the hand of the devil.

It was warm in the night,

I was cold as a stone...

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for.'

First contact

2300, Friday

3rd December

Tucson phoned the FBI, Federal Plaza, Broadway, 'Agent Mikaela Straker's office.'

'Who's calling please?' said a male voice.

'John.'

'Hold the line please sir and I'll try putting you through.'

Twenty seconds later a friendly female voice came on the line. 'Hello John is it? How can the FBI help you?'

'You're Agent Straker of the FBI?' enquired Tucson.

'That's me, yes. Can I have your full name, John, I'm not sure I know your voice?' said the agent.

'I'm just John for the time being and you don't know me yet.'

‘Just John?’

‘Yes, but leave out the just.’

‘Okay, how can I help you, John?’ She replied patiently, enjoying her play-acting with the serious voice on the line.

‘I’ve seen your exploits in the FBI lately; you’re a talented woman, Mikaela. It’s unusual to be a celebrity and special agent in real time no doubt?’ said the caller, who believed Agent Straker was destined to be his beautiful, stereotypical movie screen representation of a FBI special agent and his way of gaining the media spotlight for his plans.

‘Well, sure I try to spread myself about, I’m flattered by your interest in me though,’ she said more patiently now.

‘A woman is only flattered by someone she respects AGENT Straker. You won’t respect me – not in the conventional sense anyway.’

‘I’m sorry. I don’t understand?’ she said, frowning, trying to fathom what the man said as she looked at her unfinished report on the laptop amidst piles of paperwork on her unusually cluttered desk.

‘You do not need to understand, but your new socialite status is the reason why I’ve chosen you.’

‘Chosen ME for what?’ she said, still frowning, impatient, having an urgent report to do.

‘I’m setting off on a long planned journey of sorts and I want you along for the ride, Mikaela. You’ll soon have a learned satisfaction, although a reluctant one I suppose, finding out about all the Vatican’s hidden knowledge, locked away since the 4th century.’

‘Okay, sure that’s grand, John, but I’m a little tired now, so just pop our travel arrangements for the Rome journey into my tray here thanks, I’ll start packing straight away.’

She then gave him, her direct line before finally saying, ‘Good luck,’ as she’d hung up. ‘Why do they always pick on me, silly weirdoes?’ she said, weary now wanting to be home.

She'd come back from court, nearly finished her final case report and hoped it was to be the end of a long week. It was, but next week would be even longer, much longer.

Into the cellar

Friday night

Sometime later, Mo's obese unconscious body was bumping up and down in the van as it sped down the gravel dirt track to Lake Cabin. His cell phone constantly ringing but long since taken from his black overcoat's pocket and thrown from the van. His captor wasn't going to be caught by a cell phones GPS technology. Lake Hopatcong stretched off away in front of the cabin, its surface reflecting the light of the near full moon. The watery

expanse giving an optical illusion of slanting down towards the small rock and pebble-strewn shore, twenty paces from the cabin's log-panelled front door.

Minutes later inside the cabin's concrete walled basement, Mo's silent and limp body was dumped down beside his new friend to be John Altrap. Who'd started kicking and screaming in his chair seeing another person dragged down the creaky, wooden cellars stairs. His kicks, however, were only three inches in length. His leg chains unyielding secured to the basement floor. His loud screams deadened by the saliva-laden cotton wool in his mouth.

'Preener this isn't going to get you anywhere. Be grateful for this companionship with your new partner in grime down here. If you only knew the trouble I endured bringing you back here safely, you would thank me for it; staying away from all those main streets, driving around villages and towns instead of through them, avoiding all those street cameras. It's heart breaking.'

Yesterday he'd brought Altrap down to the dank smelling cellar, with its thick old cobwebs in every corner that were the only real soft furnishings within the sparsely furnished low ceilinged cellar, its rafters plainly visible just over six feet from the floor, giving the place a cramped claustrophobic feel too it. Altrap's lips were sealed by Tucson's favourite products of late – duct tape and a golf ball wrapped in cotton wool rammed in behind the teeth. No one would be likely to hear him anyway. Tucson knew the nearest homestead, was a rundown place seldom visited several acres away as the crow flies off through the dense brush and forest along the lakeshore.

The only other homestead was way back from the shore, behind a small hill, its previous owner originally building Tucson's cabin. He'd felt guilty paying that old man a paltry sum of sixty-eight thousand dollars for it. The fellow seemed outwardly dismayed selling part of his land, but Tucson sensed he'd been inwardly relieved as he was too long in the tooth for living on his own looking after cattle. He'd soon sold the main house and moved out to

go live with relatives. The cabin he'd built wasn't on the best side of the lake and was small. When Tucson bought the place, it needed work fixing it back into shape. However, its new owner was a talented man, putting his mind to most things and getting the job done, gaining satisfaction renovating it into a modern habitable log cabin.

Grunting with effort to get the dead weight moving again, he dragged Mo Lovingstock's heavy, barrel-shaped, body to his new resident seat. With some effort, he got him sitting upright. 'Phew you're a big boy!' Finally able to stretch out his back, he took a few seconds catching his breath. He knew the cigars weren't helping his cause, but had long since exorcised those demons cajoling him to quit. Soon Lovingstock's podgy arms were placed along the iron side rails of the old one-piece school seat and desk, and were then secured with chains, brackets and a padlock, bought from an old farm supply depot.

The arrival of Father Abraham Render

John Altrap and Mo Lovingstock sat dejected in the dark basement barely lit by the closed wooden shutter covering the small rectangular basement window up near the ceiling. Their movements restricted by the old wooden school desks causing sore asses into the bargain. Conversation was even harder with their mouths stuffed and duct taped. However, some intellectual grunting and nodding had given the two men quiet cold comfort together. Altrap heard the van coming along down the dirt road first and looked at Lovingstock nodding his head towards the growing engine noise.

Tucson was glad of the wide staircase down into the basement and was not too bothered about the lifting and dragging of the thin, unconscious Catholic priest down. Always careful to conceal his features from the captives down below, wearing a thin balaclava he kept beside the basement trapdoor. He wasn't entirely sure exactly what was to happen yet to his new priest captive and the other two already installed, as letting one or two loose might further his ends. He soon had Father Render down and secured, chained into his, newly purchased, old wooden school desk. The unconscious cleric's bloodied face sunk down into his soaking wet long, black shiny coat.

'GENTLEMEN I will just say to you, you are all here for a reason,' Tucson said to the two conscious men, having to raise his voice over their groaning and complaining. 'The reason is, my life has been made an intolerable nightmare. I am using you three for the moment to further my goal. I will not say everything will be fine for all of you in the long run. It will depend on reactions received from the outside world, and those who this is aimed at. You will be pawns, maybe to trade with, maybe to kill, whatever. You mean nothing to me as I have lost four already. So you three fools, the Preener Altrap always reshaping his hair during his, spruced up, mundane news reports, Lovingstock the Fawner to the stars and divas, and the Do-gooder priest; three who I have no emotional connection with and

will pose no problem for me to kill. I say this, if you try to manufacture some type of escape, I will kill you. You three represent a slice of modern living that existence didn't design, well maybe not so much the priest. Render, in some obscure warped way maybe has his uses – nurturing and or curing the drugged up disease on our society.

'Anyway, Lovingstock, I saw your heart-broken partner on the news, telling of his despair. Yet he had a glint in his eye, loving the spotlight all the same. It's ironic how it goes with the media fawning all over him now.'

John Altrap was a TV reporter, come freelance journalist, often used when sudden events had demanded extra reporters on site, and impressed with a number of outsourced leads for CNN and other companies. John Altrap was not used to people talking down to him and along with his present state of mind, closeted up for days; he erupted in the confines of his desk, jolting his head and body trying to break loose. Altrap was not known for shying away from adversity. But soon started to calm down again when very little air was entering his lungs via his nose.

John Tucson was a man devoid of emotion these days, whether it was the skull and brain injury or his heart having been ripped apart. He casually went and picked up an iron bar leaning against the cellar wall. Then he drifted over to Altrap, who was glaring up at him, 'I see your whales went back out to sea after all that clamour of yours,' and with a nonchalant sideswiping swing knocked him out cold for the second time in two days. The last thing Altrap heard was Father Render's distant sounding voice off to his left saying, 'What happened?'

After weekend

800 hours, Tuesday

Federal Plaza

FBI Special Agent Straker had an unwinding but sombre enough weekend. Chief Mortimer had phoned her and given her Monday off as well after their trial finished up last Friday with three consecutive life terms for a depraved lunatic. She was now back sitting at her office desk Tuesday morning sifting through the in-tray and weighing up the merits of her date last Sunday evening. She was seeing this insurance guy called Maurice on and off, even though she knew it just wasn't working, but persevered possibly because her sister had put such effort into bringing them together. She was tagging him along and wasn't getting any younger at thirty three years of age, she often reminded herself. Her priority should be in finding her soul mate; she was admonishing herself while trying to settle down to read the files from the in-tray.

Her final case report relating to the 'Garage Murders' was now back in her inbox, much larger than when it had left the outbox last Friday evening. 'Boss has been busy over the weekend,' she mused aloud to herself. The case had involved a manic-depressive husband who'd butchered his young children, right before his wife's eyes as she had violently contorted her body, lacerating her wrists trying to free herself. Helplessly bound

and gagged to the wheel of their personnel carrier. She'd been three feet away from the little boy and girl as they lay on the garage floor, straining their little necks to look back at their mother. All tied up with rope, bought to tow the broken-down family car only three months previously. The monster had planned to turn the vehicles exhaust on himself after he had completed his 'Three duties for the day' as he later called it. In suffocating the eldest child, the younger brother had let out an agonizing cry before been silenced and butchered by his father.

The police arrived bursting through the garage door just as the mother drew her last breath, after a table knife had been slowly and steadily pushed into the side of her throat before it was then dragged forcibly across it, ripping through skin and arteries as it went.

The final report was now full of commendations and congratulations from her superiors. She began reading her commendations and a renewed glow rose again. 'Great work - Excellent result well done.' One report said, 'This good work has to merit advancement.'

All the while there was an envelope with a small bulge sitting untouched in the tray having been temporally squashed by her thick reports and going unnoticed now on top. Mikaela absentmindedly reached for the envelope eventually coming to the end of the last commendation, still reading the last few lines and smiling, as she tore the envelope open. She began to pull the letter from inside, dislodging the object causing the bulge. It fell out onto her commendations, right in front of her. She hurdled backwards and up out of the chair. The seat sent crashing back into a cabinet. She was not far behind it, instantly three paces away looking back in shock, her hand now to mouth.

She'd watched it hit the report first, and then bounce three inches into the air. The severed finger came to rest on the reports FBI official stamp, pointing straight at her. Its nail side was facing down. The bent finger wrapped in a thin layer of cling film, evilly beckoning her back over.

Agent Wildman and BAU Agent, Chloe Fox, rushed in to the office, hearing Mikaela's yelp and the crash of an upended chair. Her hand still placed over her mouth, she closed back in on the now suddenly eerie-looking report on the desk, the letter and envelope forgotten in her free hand. Wildman was saying something to her but she didn't even notice. She looked at the envelope in her hand. Then with a scissors from the stationary holder, began prizing the folded letter out.

Altrap's cellar awakening and missing,

0100 hours last Sunday morning

Just like in his school days, John Altrap was sleeping behind the pine-coloured old desk. He eventually started to stir and lifted his chin off his chest. Feeling a dull ache somewhere, but couldn't quite put his finger on where it was stemming from. He also smelled an acrid, sickly smell in the air, tasting it in his mouth. Something had been burnt. / *can't figure... find where... I can't put my finger on where...* He looks down, then jolted back, letting out a shocked muffled scream seeing his left forefinger gone. A half inch stump now only there just under where his knuckle had been, and now seeing only the blackened, crispy-burnt flesh. He moaned and heard muffled voices of concern coming

from beside him. He suddenly felt the full pain of the injury. Somehow, it was coming from the region where his finger had been, only adding to his shock.

He continued to sob silently to himself, before he noticed the Captor sitting at a small three-legged table, in the dimly-lit corner of the low-roofed cellar. Altrap futilely lunged toward his tormentor, who looked amusedly at him though a thin stream of smoke, eight feet away. Altrap's eyes bulged with hatred. Then horror and sadness struck him again. He saw what must be his severed finger wrapped in clear cling film on the table. His baseball-capped kidnapper took a thin cigar from his mouth and placed it on the ashtray, all the while still looking at him; he casually picked up Altrap's finger and popped it into an envelope. The thought of his finger being posted somewhere, drowned out the brief thought it could be sewn back on soon. He convulsed in his chair – not even sure if he was trying to reach for his finger or Captor. It didn't matter; he barely got himself three inches off the seat before he could go no further.

Tucson sealed the envelope with water dabbed on by tissue paper. No CSI was going to catch him that easy. He picked up the small cigar from the edge of an ashtray. Altrap's eyes had followed his Captor's rubber-gloved hand and noticed the lighter beside it and realised it had been used to seal, melt and char the wounded flesh of his finger stump. Altrap had so much hatred in his face just then, but there was not even a care in the world on Tucson's face as he looked back at him and said, 'Agent Mikaela Straker will sit up and listen the next time I call her.'

Letter part two, Tuesday present time

Mikaela Cartwright Straker joined the New York City Police at twenty-two years of age after finishing her BA in Business Administration. While policing there, she was commended several times for acquiring valuable information on the street and solving tough gangland crimes in Manhattan.

After a few years of police duties Officer Straker, who'd an intelligence rating of 135 among other charms came to the attention of Karl Mortimer of the FBI. Her senior officer, Ferdinand Johnson, had raved about her to him and Mortimer came knocking down her door.

Agent Straker joked back then, 'I was sent off to the FBI Academy in Virginia so fast, it was human trafficking. Sure, I'd never a chance. There was no let up from him.'

Her potential was obvious and once a qualified special agent she was posted back to the Investigative Crime Section, Federal Plaza, Manhattan where her analytical uptake of information obtained during interviews and her investigative qualities brought many signed confessions.

Confessions were the furthest thing from her thoughts as her fingers barely held the offending note's edge, as if holding a dead rat by the tail. She took a breath, and started to read aloud to Agents Wildman and Fox, her free hand now resting on her desk for reassurance, not noticing the severed finger inches from hers.

Agent Straker

I popped the letter in your in-tray as requested and now hope you will begin to take me seriously. I intended to write it on fresh skin, but in the end the plant pruner and finger combo was easier, less messy.

'As you are aware some people have gone missing over the last few days in good old New York. The FBI can now bunch them all together as a one-crime case, or take them off the missing list. Cause they are right here in front of me, alive but not kicking. It will cut down your investigation costs. John Altrap,

Morton Lovingstock and Father Abraham Render are all well. Though Preener lost some weight, it's probably lying on your desk now...'

'I don't like the sound of what's coming!' interrupted Agent Chloe Fox. As Agent Straker had read the letter, her voice became slower and quieter as its words slowly started to sink in despite the sick jocular phrasing of its author. She paused for a breather turning the page, then flipped her chair and sat back down.

'I will hold these three captive, and depending on certain things coming to pass, they will be either killed or released. I know what I'm capable of - For the captives sakes don't try second guess me. What I want stated during the Feast of the Immaculate Conception service Wednesday night at St Patrick's Cathedral, is - What is the Catholic Churches current stance on- the historical authenticity of the Old Testaments two conflicting versions of Creation, and also the latest findings on the actual chronological age of the Earth. Mikaela this is a teaser for what has to follow, if this simple request is not carried out, I will kill the captives and biblical tales will resurface in present times.'

She finished reading; her eyes open wide, still looking down at it. 'That's a request?'

'Call it what you will,' Wildman said, 'sounds like he means it.'

Two German Shepherds

Thomas Dyke was one evil, no good waster and a typical 'Country Hillbilly', but living about twenty miles from New York City. He'd done everything, even bestiality. His supposed occupation of animal breeding had resulted in years of cruelty court cases, banning him from owning animals but barely curtailing his work. Tom's most recent ban had ended a good while back, so he'd gotten hold of two German Shepherd puppies and started over again.

He could have sold some of his land to a rancher who came asking years ago and live off the proceeds. But he hadn't sold off. 'Fuck off' was the term he used at the time. The miser had no family or kids. The land would end up going to a niece, who didn't even visit.

Dyke was a miserable, down in the mouth, balding old man. Hoarding for a rainy day and surviving on barely anything; porridge, a loaf of bread or potatoes. Cheap Spam, leftovers swept off New Jersey's meat factory floors, was his treat. That between two thick slices of loaf could last him a day, nibbling away, sipping cheap gin. He even knew it himself. Sometimes saying, 'If I did have a shopping list, it be written on old toilet paper with items crossed out.'

The two German Shepherds had never seen a tin of dog food and were as scrawny as their owner. Thing was, Animal Rescue had forgotten about ole Thomas, living down off the freeway, outside Linden. Two AR workers used to check up on him. One of them named Alf Kennedy retired and the other took up working for an exclusive cat hospital on Long Island. So now he was off the radar. The three-year ban was up now a year and no sight nor sound of any animal welfare officers.

Dyke had featured on one TV programme where six animal rescue heavies with trucks did a dawn raid on his God-forsaken kennels, taking every animal in sight. Alf Kennedy the rescuer really hated Tom Dyke and ranted about him on the TV show. 'Even the local wildlife in the woods here, looked for a lift off us. We've so many complaints about this Dyke fellow shooting squirrels, birds and rabbits. Not to eat them it's just because he's darn mean. If the animal wasn't useful or edible, he'd still kill it.'

Tom was out in his yard after lunch throwing a leftover morsel of barely-cooked potato over the fence for his two hungry dogs, and then wiped his hands down the front of his old denim dungarees. This was their first piece of food in two days.

Dyke had five pups from the German Shepherds some months ago and had placed an ad in a local paper, then drove the pups to their prospective new owners, instead of the other way around. The cute black and tan pups sleeping or yawning in a basket on the seat beside him. 'Can't tell from a pup that its mother's anorexic.' he'd said smiling to himself driving along at the time. He'd even had a bath and dressed up mighty fine, making nearly \$800. Not a bad return for the upkeep of the pup's parents. He would be throwing away his dinner scraps anyhow. Dyke had fed the bitch better when she pregnant all the same, but usually at the expense of the dogs dinner. One potential customer had pulled out after asking to see the parents. He'd said he was selling them for his brother, who lived in Connecticut. They could drive on up if they'd wanted.

He was sixty eight and lived on the secluded two acre homestead all his life. Today Dyke was still suffering with a hangover going into the afternoon as he bent down to shove a bowl of water in under the gate. His head becoming dizzy as he did so and caused his cigarette to drop from his mouth into the bowl. 'Damn ye mutts,' he said and stood back up, kicking the bowl in the rest of the way, drenching the two poor mutts and leaving the bowl upside down. As the male dog started licking the water off the bitch's drowned coat.

‘You’re a smart one aren’t you, you little mutt.’ And sneered in at the dog, ‘You know you won’t be having any more of that today, don’t you?’

Dyke

Dyke wasn’t to know John Tucson had just last week watched the re-run of that Animal Rescue show made many years ago. That he’d somehow found out where he lived and was driving down Freeway 78 at this time. Tucson was over the New Jersey state line, his resolve set for what was to come, a cigar now lit and hanging from his mouth. He had a few months ago downloaded some dubbing software. His own remix of a ‘Faithless’ song now blared away its high-pitched organ sounds on the van’s CD player. The voice saying, ‘This is my Church. This is how I heal my hurts.’ He’d dubbed out the rest of the irrelevant lyrics and was resting his arm on the driver window ledge, strumming his thumb on the steering wheel to the beat. ‘God-given right wasters,’ he muttered through his lips. ‘Ole git thinks things are all over, forgotten about. Well... if there is anything documentary channels do well, its repeats. They say revenge is best served cold and justice served swiftly. You’re going to be having some cold justice.’

That Discovery Channel episode had a number of similar cases, but Dyke looked like a right prick to the watching Tucson. Of the six breeding pairs and one litter rescued, five dogs were put down soon after. Tucson remembered scrawny Dyke on the show, looking up at a 6 foot 3 inch rescue worker called Kennedy, saying

‘Get the damn hell off my land or I’ll tear your head off,’ Dyke hadn’t given a damn. Not a hint of remorse. He’d called the rescuer a ‘Coon’ who wasn’t even black. Tucson pulled off Freeway 78, down the dirt track to Dyke’s place. *Back then documentary makers didn’t hold back on names, would never have found you,* thought Tucson.

Dyke was now standing at his open front door, a puzzled look on his face having heard the van drive up, his dogs across the yard barking and growling at the oncoming noise.

‘What the damn hell you want?’ he said, as Tucson was getting out from the van.

‘Hello...em... Mr Dyke is it?’ And he reached back into the van, taking a package from the seat.

‘Yes,’ Dyke said when he saw the brown parcel coming out of the van.

I have a delivery for you Mr Dyke. I need a signature that’s all.’ He walked over to Dyke.’

‘I’m not signing anything and didn’t order nothing either. WHAT THE HELL IS IT?’ His loudness set the two dogs off barking. ‘SHUT THE HELL UP OVER THERE.’ Dyke roared towards the fenced enclosure. They stopped.

‘I’m only here doing my delivery guy job, Mr Dyke, don’t shoot the messenger.’ He said defensively and held the parcel out in front of him.

Dyke looked confused, peering intently at the parcel. *It’s not a brown envelope with parking ticket anyway.* ‘But I ain’t ordered anything. Where’d it come from? Did—’

‘From your left.’ The package smashed into the old man’s head. His body jolted violently. Two steps Dyke moved but didn’t drop down. Tucson looked bemused, poised to strike again. Watching on, as the man’s brain assimilated the skull-shattering blow, like the

first few licks of a lollypop before the taste buds register. The old man slowly dropped, folding downwards onto his hands and knees, feeling pain now, sheer pain. Not shaking his head – clearing it would hurt too much. Blood now ran from the ear around into his eye.

The dogs manic barking, starting to annoy Tucson standing over the stunned man. He quickly swapped the parcelled brick to his other hand and slammed it into the other side. Smashing the head sideways, it stayed there, hanging listless. Dyke finally groaned as his arm was kicked out from under him, toppling him over, Chin cracking into the gravel before as his body hit the dirt and farted.

His assailant went to the van donning overalls and rubber gloves, collecting some rope from the back.

‘You old waster,’ he said returning, uncaring whether the prostate man could still hear him. ‘God-given right’ was all Dyke heard before unconsciousness. Tucson tied his arms behind him and dragged the limp body across the yard, ‘Some old teacher preacher in your schooldays told you humans were the chosen ones. The planet was created for us. All that damn crap. You won’t be around to see it, but I’m redressing the history books on that score. You’re no better than scum. How a decrepit asshole like you is allowed exist causing havoc on senseless animals. All cause evolution gave you a damn brain.’

Tucson had considered tying the old man up alive and leaving him out in the fields for the wildlife to come sniffing, thinking to duct tape up his mouth, not wanting animals frightened off by his dying growls. But when Tucson had driven down the disused laneway hearing dogs bark, another plan hatched. He dragged the thin limp body over to the dogs. Tucson had guessed rightly seeing the sorry state of the skin and bone German Shepherds and the overpowering smell of filth from their chicken wire fenced-in kennel. Both animals crouched down growling, teeth bared. From their condition he realised they hadn’t much life backing up their growls. He let go of Dyke whose face smacked heavily onto the bottom of the thick wooden fence post, sliding down to rest on the dirt.

The dogs restarted their barking and growling, violently wagging their tails and haunches in defensive fear and doubt at the intruder. Tucson stood at the gate letting them see him better, needing to make them quiet. He could have shot them, but then Dyke would remain whole. He hunkered down looking at them. Then his two arms reached fully inside the gates rungs.

'Here fella, thata boy.' His gloved hands palms down, reached towards the animals a few feet away, they both stopped motionless and silent. The male cocking its head enquiringly as the female walked over and began nuzzling his hand, then placed her head under Tucson's outstretched palm. The male soon followed. This type of thing was perplexing Tucson in recent times.

Dogs quietened. The attacker returned to his van finding the knife kept inside his driver's door upholstery. Then casually walked back to the prostate Dyke, quietness all around for the first time and knifed the length of the man's trousers, exposing a scrawny liver-spotted leg. The two German Shepherds with their mangy lank coats covering only bone scaffolding beneath painted a macabre picture. Now sitting attentively on their haunches, ears pricked, and tails wagging, excrement everywhere around them and matted to their coats. Plight forgotten now looking like fully grown pups told to sit, but bursting to play.

The knife made a few draws across the top of the man's' leg. Once he'd some deepening leverage he see-sawed back and forth. Then going at it from another angle he cut a good thick wedge from Dyke's thigh; all done without emotion, butcher-like. Dyke groaned from a faraway place, in contrast to his leg twitching in the here and now. Each chunk that came free was thrown in through the gate. Then he knifed the next from the calf muscle, cut through deep, creating another chunk for tossing.

The two dogs, though starved, playfully went to the human flesh and sniffed, deciding if to eat or leave. The female bit into one piece tossing it into the air, watching it land. Then

crouched low, front legs outstretched, tail wagging, playfully looking at the meat. The male dog sniffed excitedly at one particular big piece of thigh, taking a ravenous bite and gulping it down. He then backed away, looking happy and resumed watching Tucson, only glancing back at the meat every now and then as an afterthought.

Final arrangements for St Patrick's Cathedral Mass

Agent Straker was well respected, but was thirty three years old and still hadn't found herself a soul mate. She had many relationships, but her high intelligence normally left her macho male suitors floundering while the intellectually endowed males usually melted in her gaze.

She always wished for an easy romance but her job was making her wait. It was hard sometimes relaxing into the arms of her partners during cosy nights in, when earlier that day she may have been knee deep in a major investigation or pointing a gun in some perpetrator's face.

Her work in an inuring way replaced the sanctity of a solid relationship. The altruistic endeavours of helping victims find justice would temporarily fill the gap. But she knew those usually only lasted a day or so after a successful prosecution.

This new episode that Agent Straker found herself in had her very perplexed. She knew well this maniac was smart. What she didn't realise was that this maniac was not at all happy with her offhand dismissal of his long-arranged phone call to her. Or that she was to be the perfect masthead for his upcoming crusade against the Church. His reluctant Knight in shining glamour would be his good-looking tool, to turn the tide once and for all against the ailing religious domination of world cultures.

It was now the sixth day since this had all set off with Altrap's abduction and they didn't have much to go on at FBI, Federal Plaza. There were no leads as yet. His letter was put through the CSI wringer with nothing turning up the other end. His phone call last Friday had been from a quiet area near Ridgewood, New Jersey, ten miles west of the Hudson. The lack of progress had the FBI chomping at the bit for the next instalment. No witnesses, nothing.

Mikaela received her second phone call from Tucson at five pm Tuesday, the day she'd received the finger.

'Hello Mikaela, I imagine you have my correspondence at this stage?'

'Yes thank you so much. What's behind this, you have something against the Catholic religion?'

'Agent Straker, I will tell you what I want to tell you. Do not ask questions. You are wasting whatever time I feel I have on this phone before it is traced. Have you arranged for the sermon at Saint Patrick's Cathedral tomorrow night?'

'Yes I have spoken with Chief Mortimer,' Mikaela said nervously. 'He has contacted the Arch-diocese in relation to the matter. I understand Archbishop Herd, the head of the Catholic Church in New York, is fully up to date regards your captives.'

'For the captive's sake he'd better take me seriously.'

'Chief Mortimer has told the Archbishop that. Who is contacting the Papal Office in Rome, as we speak, for clarification and clearance for the sermon to be altered in the light of your demands.'

'That's good, Straker. I was right when I decided you'd be an excellent addition to my plan. This is the start, where people begin to sit up and listen. I'm looking forward to the Mass.' His voice went quiet. 'And by the way, go to old Tom Dyke's place outside Linden, New Jersey, there's two distressed dogs that need attention as well.'

'What's in Linde...' she paused, suddenly perplexed. 'What do you mean as well?'

'As well as old Dyke himself I guess. He'll need a burial and some funeral arrangements.' The line was dead. Mikaela immediately phoned the New Jersey police at Linden. After a few minutes they had located an officer who knew of old Dyke's place

Render and the star, Tuesday

'That was eventful earlier. Those dogs were eerie, but that stuffs happened a few times since the injury, damn weird.' Tucson said to himself on the way back to the lake cabin. Then his mind turned to more mundane matters. 'Hope the heating kicked in for my friends back home, it is cold now.'

Warmth wafted out at him as he opened the cellar trap door. *They still look a little cold though*, and started down the steps into the cabin's low-ceilinged basement. *Sitting stationary all day wouldn't generate much heat.* He'd heard the three men's muffled complaints or reluctant relief when he'd opened the trap door. He couldn't tell which. Walking down the last few steps with the solid oak tray bringing milkshakes from the fridge, he'd a sharp pang of sadness. He'd remembered bringing Natalie her breakfast in bed with that very tray.

It'd crossed Lovingstock's mind in the last six hours, *What if he doesn't return. No one knows we're here.* Communication between the three captives was energetic when

Tucson's van was heard leaving earlier that day and consisted of grunts and meaningful eye contact. Altrap tried to say, 'We'll make it out of this,' but the others couldn't understand. 'This is crap, pathetic. A deaf and dumb convention with the lights out would make more progress,' the anguished Altrap muttered and spluttered too himself. The others had looked on uncomprehending. A few more tries of speaking were made, but no headway. Altrap then tried one word at a time and eventually Father Render nodded vigorously, finally understanding.

This muted type social interaction in itself was a comfort. The three men gained quiet solace from it, in their hideous predicament together. Altrap was here the longest, last Thursday, and his damaged hand still hurt like hell. The cold damp in the cellar didn't help.

'Hello there my fat, fawner friend, Lovingstock.' Tucson's muffled voice behind his covered face was sweet poison to the three captive's ears. He opened the duct tape on the New York Times man's face, leaving it dangling from his cheek. The flamboyant gay man clumsily spat the golf ball and saliva soaked cotton wool onto the desk in front of him. The ball continued on, hitting the floor, bouncing before finally rolling noisily along the dust-laden floor. Tucson took the milkshake from the tray placing it onto the desk, near enough so the columnist could bend down to suck. Then went and retrieved the now grit speckled ball and placed it on top of the sodden cotton wool, ready for reinsertion.

Lovingstock was relieved the shake wasn't as thick as the one he'd been given earlier. He had sucked like hell and reckoned he'd only got half of it before it had been taken from him. His Captor was hyper this morning and in a hurry. The entertainment columnist's heavy frame meant two milkshakes a day didn't go a long way. He knew his Captor wasn't feeding them right anyway.

Tucson expected Lovingstock would say, 'You'll pay for this.' as he'd done so yesterday. He'd just gone straight to the straw and sucked. He was going to suck that mother dry.

Tucson left Mo with his milkshake and brought the tray over to Altrap. Seeing hate in his eyes but unconcerned by them he completed the same process, removing the duct tape around the mouth, leaving it hanging from the reporter's cheek. Altrap once he'd cleared out his mouth, sucked forcibly down on his shake, all the time his eyes defiant, looking up at his smiling tormentor. He abruptly came up for air, lifting his head high away from the straw. 'Damn, you'll...' The dangling sticking tape gripped the milkshake. His chin suddenly held regally high now flipped the cup into the air, spilling its thick chocolate milk onto the desk.

Tucson nonchalantly released the cup from the sticky tape and picking its straw from the floor, dropped it back in the cup. 'That'll learn you.' Still smiling he turned away, not caring if Altrap bent over the shake again, sucking on its dredges.

He walked the few feet to the priest's seat. 'Father, how are you this afternoon?' His lip's barely moved behind the gap of his black balaclava, putting the tray down on the wooden desk in front of Father Render and released the duct tape from his mouth.

'Stiff,' he replied flatly, after dribbling out the cotton and popping the ball out from his mouth onto his closed lap. Render, a mild-mannered soft-spoken man by design or faith, would never forget the only part of his Captors' face he could see, those eyes and drawn lips. Render tasted the blood in his mouth from last night's ordeal, an experience that was the extreme opposite of those pleasant, cordial daily visits to the elderly or sickly of his parish. The slightly built and normally good natured priest had a headache all day and didn't know if the back of his head was injured or bloodied. He suspected it was both. His

chin felt sore and his teeth were paining him. Render's extensive counselling courses during his long clerical career made him realise listening to this maniac's tone, that he was dealing with an educated and nonchalantly over-confident person, who for some reason didn't appear to fear anything around him.

Tucson still stooping because of the cellars rafters then went over to the small table with the ashtray and dragged a chair back over in front of Abraham Render. 'Do you know what annoys me about the Church?'

Render just looked up at him vacantly, sucking on the shake's straw.

'Well, let's say it's akin to a hardened lowlife criminal, Father. He'll only admit to what's nailed to him. We cannot find the body of the woman you killed!'

'I didn't do it,' Tucson added, putting on a dodgy accent with a low nasal voice

'We have now found the body.'

'I didn't do it.'

Render's eyes widened as he heard the Captor's monologue, but continued to suck, look and listen.

'We found sperm inside her woman's cavity.'

'I didn't do it. I said.'

'It matches your DNA to 99.999 percent.'

'What's that mean?'

'It's your semen found loitering there.'

'I didn't do it. That ex-boyfriend of my chic stole my used condom.'

'Your girlfriend's too repulsive to have an ex-boyfriend.'

'Okay, I did it but I didn't kill her friend.'

Tucson's bemused smile came back. 'This hidden, shrouded type denial is what science and the world has contended with from the hierarchy of your Church over the centuries.'

What about the Bible that preached women had more ribs in their skeleton, because the Lord took one from Adam to create Eve. It's only in the last two centuries that medics found man and woman have the same amount. The world believed until then the biblical version was correct.'

Tucson looked at Render, waiting for him to comprehend his logic. 'Okay then, Father,' Tucson persisted, enjoying the opportunity to tell someone of the clergy his pent up knowledge. 'The Star of Bethlehem has been used for 2,000 years as one of the proofs or justifications for Jesus being the Son of God. Yet, TV's very own God Channel aired a supposedly ground-breaking documentary, claiming this huge star mentioned in the Bible is incredibly, after all this time, our very own planet Jupiter.' Tucson outstretched his arms, looking exasperated at Render, expecting a look of surprise.

The cleric just looked up at the tall man sitting before him and continued to suck. Noisy air and fluid suction sounds coming from the bottom of his milkshake.

'I'm not getting through here. This is a recently concocted theory in an effort to bring back credibility into this biblical fairy tale, by adopting a planet now instead of a great stand-alone star that was breaking the laws of physics. The presenter goes on to state, planet Jupiter would have appeared to stop, to the three wise men, over where the baby Jesus was born.'

'I don't know about this sort of stuff,' Render said finally finished his shake. 'I'm a priest. My role is helping people. The sick and aged in community, I have spent my time trying to help people with drug addic—'

'That meaningless documentary is on every Christmas nowadays and is advocated by your Church. This religious, nutty presenter confidently explained, as the Earth is on an inner and shorter orbit around our Sun, it overtakes an outer planet like Jupiter. Speed accepted Father...'

'What!'

‘Eh...like those two-hundred metre runners sprinting around the bend in the Olympics. The one on the inside goes around the bend quicker. So okay, when seen from our point of view from here on little old Earth, we observe the actual occasion when our Earth catches up, being on the inside track, and starts to move ahead of Jupiter. Jupiter then visually appears to stop for a short period of time as the Earth overtakes Jup—’

‘People back then believed the Sun travelled around the Earth, so what you’re say—’

‘I realise that, Father,’ Tucson said, cutting back across him, his tone patient, as if talking to a headstrong child ‘It doesn’t matter in this instance. In the fourth century before Christ ever lived, the Babylonian people knew of the planet Jupiter and four other planets in the night sky. They even built astronomy towers as they were needed to read the sky for travelling and telling the time of year to plant crops, etcetera,’ Tucson said, pausing and shifted himself into a more comfortable position on the chair in front of the priest.

He thought for a moment before continuing. ‘Heard of the ancient Antikythera mechanism, Do-gooder?’

The priest just shook his head from side to side.

‘Thought as much, it’s a bronze structure that displays the planets and stars and was used for sea travel. It and many like it were made well before Christ was born. Jupiter was a well-documented planet by the ancient Greeks and Arabs as well. Yet the Gospel of Matthew preaches, “The wise men followed the Star”, and these wise men, the Bible says, were supposedly astrologers and astronomers. Don’t you think someone would have told Matthew something like ‘Matthew that star, eh! It’s really only Jupiter.’ It’s also ironic that a guiding star was virtually compulsorily for scribes when symbolising Royal Births back then, Matthew was more probably plagiarising—’

‘Would you leave him alone,’ said Lovingstock with some venom, surprising even himself with the words he’d spoken. ‘This poor priest has done nothing to you, that’s enough!’

Their Captor got up from his chair, crossed over to Lovingstock raising his hand threateningly, then gently placed the dangling duct tape back across his mouth. 'I see you finished your chocolate milkshake before becoming brave, eh? Fat boy! Any more of that from you and some of *your* body parts will be posted out of here as well.'

He returned to Render. 'And how come Matthew said Joseph fled to Egypt with Jesus to avoid King Herod who supposedly demanded all children be killed to protect his own throne. Yet Luke's gospel never mentioned Jesus in exile in Egypt?'

Father Render shook his head from side to side, a forlorn look on his face.

'I'll tell you why, because they're used to accepting uncorroborated facts as the truth. Anyway your Church's regressive stance on attaining a higher knowledge has created a very confused and alienated flock. It continually fails to accept change. Their lack of guidance and procrastination has seen people move away from Church beliefs. How can the Church expect followers to believe in these falsehoods, at the same time uphold the Catholic moral system? Your powers have lost face in the modern age, still grasping at the shirttails of the Holy Trinity. Jesus was not the son of God and the Church should give up the ghost on that as well.'

Father Render's forlorn look turned to disgust. 'How can you say such things, look at all the good our missionaries in foreign lands have done. It is because of the Church's good name that our missionaries have been allowed enter Third World countries and help countless millions.'

'Speaking in terms of countless millions, the Vatican still advocates the teachings of the New Testament, yet over the centuries it has banned many gospels that didn't quite fit in with what they wanted.'

'People need belief in God and a reason for existence here on Earth and in the ever after - in heaven - Is this why we are held captive in this cellar?'

'The reason why you are here is... religion has elevated a heaven over a person's one chance of existence on this planet. There is no heaven and that one existence is wasted in self-reproach and doubt. If I release any of you, the media will swarm for your stories. I hope you spread my gospel like the others, Father. Enough of this banter.'

He paused looking at each seated captive in turn. 'If things on the outside don't go to plan, one of you is going to die soon.'

Leads, but no clues

- Thirty minutes later Mikaela and Agent Wildman were driving furiously along the New Jersey Turnpike.

CSI were already in place when the two agents eventually arrived in the darkness down the bumpy lane.

'Agents Straker and Wildman,' she said.

'Hello, I'm Officer Dylan; I'll take you through the crime scene. We've spotlights placed in the relevant locations about the homestead as you can see; this first one here is where some type of scuffle took place. There's a small amount of blood, 'Looks like something was used to hit Dyke near this spot and knock him down. There are imprints on the ground that seem to be where hands, knees and toe caps were. We think the dead person was on all fours here.'

He walked another short distance across the gravel dirt yard to another lit-up area and pointed, 'This is where the killing was done, having been dragged from point A over there. Next, the body was dragged in here possibly, after death. We think the dogs took another bite or two, see the calf area here.'

Mikaela looked down at Dyke's badly mutilated leg then at the two scrawny, silent but happy looking dogs a few feet away. She knelt down in the pungent smelling dog's paddock. The spotlight over the scene showing a lot of blood that still had a semi-congealed but liquid look to it; - it shined in the lights glare.

'We couldn't locate where some of the mutilated parts have gone,' Officer Dylan continued, 'Until one of the officers here suggested sweeping a spotlight over the rest of the dog pound. What we found were five or six fresh blood stained patches soaked into the dirt,' Dylan grimaced at the two of them. 'It was then obvious enough what had taken place, he had thrown the dog's human fillets. Animal rescue are on route.'

The three of them tried to make sense of why this sorry old man was killed. 'This killer fellow knows his forensics by the look of it?' Mikaela said enquiringly.

'There's not much evidence here, the only leads we're getting so far are for those skinny mutts,' he said a bit dismayed. 'Maybe in the daylight something might surface. We recovered some recent tyre marks and will have them checked out.'

'Anything in the house?' she said

'Not that we've found anyway.'

Straker was back in the office by 11.30 pm. It had been a long day and she still had to get this latest report ready.

'No witnesses again,' she said to herself, picking up a note on her desk from Mortimer and read it aloud.

'Hi, Mikaela couldn't wait for you here. His call earlier was made from a phone booth in a quiet suburb in Hamilton, New Jersey. No cameras. I'll tell you about my chat with Archbishop Herd tomorrow. Good night.'

'Well at least someone's gone to have some sleep, eh, Chief!' she said aloud.

Mortimer v Herd, earlier that day.

Archbishop Herd was a loud bullying man, full of his own importance. A devout Catholic but some people said, 'there was very little Christian in him'. He'd dominate any room of people with his voice, though his words weren't as engrossing as he believed. 'Inane chatter,' Father Render one of his priests from the small parish of St Simon of Stock and now captive, once called it.

Herd could talk away confidently and authoritative about the most mundane things. One such occasion he'd been to some place on holiday that no cleric's at the pastoral meeting knew of or visited. But he was the Archbishop so all seven priests and the bishop present stayed quiet and listened to his irrelevant ten minute travelogue. Hearing the exact route of how he'd drove from his hotel onto a nearby motorway. Every turn he'd made. Every shop and street that he passed was mentioned in this faraway city they'd never set eyes on. But he had even backtracked once saying, 'No I didn't take that turn it was the next one.' And

all the priests had listened to every God damn word of it. Two of the priests were fined for minor transgressions by him previously; still they had to suck up his tirade despite their misgivings. The Archbishop had carried on oblivious.

Herd was not the most astute person Chief Mortimer gathered after phoning him earlier about the Captor's letter and the three captives. When the Chief mentioned an issue the Captor was demanding, Herd replied, 'that wouldn't be a problem, Chief Mortimer, if I only knew what the chronological age of the Earth was in the first place.' Then he laughed loudly.

Mortimer flinched away from the phone hearing the hearty belly laugh, before continuing, 'I know, Archbishop, this sounds bizarre but we know this man's a killer. We hope you can placate this lunatic.'

'I understand, Chief Mortimer, but this is an important Mass for New York's Catholic Church', the Archbishop emphasised. 'The Immaculate Conception feast day is not a day the Papal Office would appreciate the Science versus Church issue raised, now is it?'

'I fully see your position, Archbishop Herd.' He returned the phone closer to his ear, becoming accustomed to Herd's loud voice.

'Okay, Special Agent Mortimer, I will contact the Apostolic Nuncio for the United States and find out what he advises for the Mass tomorrow. I do not want to hinder your investigation. However, Mass is a time of reflection and prayer and not to be used as a debating society.'

'Thank you, Archbishop. If you could mention the Old Testaments creation chapters are not historical fact or something to that effect. A priest is one of the captives after all.'

'Okay, Chief, but once you realise a recent pope already spoke on the subject and I believe it should be left at that. Good evening.'

Mortimer's ear was ringing when he hung up. *He could make hard work of this. He won't need a microphone for that Mass anyway.'*

FBI conference, Federal Plaza, Wednesday 8th December

The female voice on the radio sang, *'In New York, concrete jungle where dreams are made of. There's nothing you can't do, now you're in New York.'*

Wildman rushed in, looking excited seeing Mortimer standing at a filing cabinet and not looking too happy. 'Chief, I just met someone called Ray or something down on the street,'

he said, coming right up to Mortimer's face, his smile beaming. 'He says he knows you from years ag—'

'WELL TELL HIM to get lost.'

'What?' the young agent said as the others, already sitting around the table, had a good laugh.

'Wildman, go turn that radio down,' the Chief said offhandedly, and then peered down again at his report. 'Her aching voice serenading on about New York, trumped my favourite old Sinatra number. Never mind. Right this lunatics running loose in the world's premier city and we've got to do something about it.' He looked up at Agent Straker sitting close by. 'No singing today outside on Broadway, eh Mikaela?' seeing her rubbing her hands putting some warmth back in them.

'No sir it's colder out there than of late.' Agent Straker was tired, but didn't let her voice betray it in the conference at the Plaza. It was Wednesday morning and she'd just made it back in from the cold.

Mortimer went over to the end of the long polished mahogany table ready for their meeting. 'Are we any closer to finding this moron or his motives yet?'

She shook her head. 'Chief this is a real live one here. Never takes the bait when I try to seek his angle. We've only spoken twice, but I'm sure I'll begin finding information soon but he warned me off about stalling him anyway. Think he wants to get his eh... whatever, up and running and won't allow idle chit chat. He's using a van. Tyre marks were analysed from the Dyke murder yesterday. They're Continentals and used on most makes.

'His voice, as you know, was recorded for the second phone call. My initial thoughts and Chloe's here, our mind-set wizard,' Straker said glancing over at Agent Fox from the Behaviour Analysis Unit. 'is for a suspect profile in an age range from forty five to fifty five, may be putting on a slight accent. Definitely isn't a standard Manhattan one. Well

educated from his tone. States things very closely and so is not easy to draw out. We're guessing he has a strong build, as he has a powerful voice. But we can't a hundred percent rely on that. We think a heavy smoker, with high nicotine dependence as his voice has a deep, sometimes rasping undertone, and displaying a paranoid and devious mentality that may be resultant from many years of this habit, a habit that was initially just a crutch to get over some event in his life. Chloe thinks that from his highly educated tone this habit is a later affliction, as lifelong high nicotine dependants don't tend to be so well educated, basically stemming from a compromised mind-set.'

Mortimer's eyebrow rose as he glanced towards Agent Fox, 'Is that correct? You can deduce all that from some phone calls?'

'Pretty much yes,' she said nodding. 'Nicotine was initially thought to help people by reducing physiological paranoia. Yet further research has found it is one of the main causes of eventual paranoia.'

'What? How is this?'

'Well, nicotine is created in plant leaves to stop insects eating them. It stimulates the electrical networks in the brain. It mimics the chemical acetylcholine, slotting into this important neuro-transmitter receptors in the brain. If taken in higher doses, say eating a large plate of tobacco leaves, it would kill a human. Stick to lettuce they've found. So to put it simply, when you wake up with a hangover right?'

'Yes had one of them today already,' Mortimer said looking bashful.

'Well that's what a heavy dependent has to carry around with him all day, a headache from inhaling all the fumes and the nicotine literally frying the brains electrical impulses, lighting up like a fireworks display.'

'You can say that again,' Mortimer said. 'Early morning conferences and hangovers don't go....'

“But smokers haven’t the flatulence that goes with the hangover,’ Wildman said, then laughed at his own joke.

‘Agent keep your filthy thoughts to yourself,’ Mortimer said all of a sudden serious again. ‘Continue on, Chloe, I’m sorry about that.’

‘Well eventually, over time, as a result of feeling constantly irritable and edgy, so to speak, they don’t tend to be as sociable, talkative or communicative as they know they could be. A heavy nicotine dependant’s unconscious mind can over time revert back to more primitive defensive social techniques, as nicotine’s a stimulant and unnecessarily induces the ‘fight or flight’ stimulus. We have all seen those people walking around dropping their shoulders with serious attitude on their faces. In effect, by nicotine absorption through the brain’s receptors, they have created a vicarious chemical ‘fight or flight’ stimulus where none actually exists. Continual excessive use leads to a devious, cunning and secretive mind, all dependant on the individual’s initial mental ability.’

‘It wouldn’t effect Wildman then!’ Mortimer shot a hard glance over at the young man.

Agent Fox gave the Chief a dazzling smirk. ‘This Captor is one such cunning personality, displaying signs of a hidden agenda and conspiratorial nature, where none need exist. Maybe some event has set him off, but if that person previously had high expectations and or social status at some earlier point in their life, it can lead to some serious, serious attitude, and makes them more susceptible to other types of drug use. We imagine the killer exhibit’s this egocentric, restless nature.’

‘Wow that’s heavy going, Agent Fox’

‘That’s why the BAU was created. Sir, it is what we do. It will be on the website soon, we are seeking clearance from Virginia.’

‘He sure doesn’t like people hurting animals either that’s for sure,’ Straker said, with one of her eyebrows rising. ‘But we can’t figure where that fits in with his plan. As—’

‘He’s showing us what he’s capable of, Mikaela,’ Mortimer cut in across her. ‘That’s what he’s at. That killing was just his pet hate, pardon the pun. Telling us he means business. Thanks, Agent Straker. Chloe have you anything else to add?’

‘I visited those suburban call boxes sir, first at Ridgewood and the second in Hamilton, also in New Jersey, nothing.’

‘Okay, Fox. Check if there are any relevant toll bridges going to New Jersey.’

‘I think he’ll do his best to avoid toll bridges and tunnels, sir,’ Straker added.

‘I know but we have to check anyway, so we can also check roads heading Up-State. Anything else, Fox?’

‘There were no cameras in the area of the pay phones or witnesses mentioning any vans.’

‘Right so,’ the Chief said, ‘the priest and Lovingstock were kidnapped from the Bronx and up in Eastchester, White Plains, respectively, while the journalist was taken in Queens. We have two pieces of camera footage of Altrap’s vehicle being followed by same white Mercedes van that are only about a hundred paces apart, so could be coincidental but doubtful, as its license plates were false, screwed on probably and encased over the real ones. We’ll hopefully find more footage soon.’

‘That reminds me of a similar case down near Atlanta sir,’ Agent Fox said. Three different sets of plates were found in the suspect’s garage and all used in different crimes.’

‘This isn’t going to be easy.’ Mortimer stressed. ‘Right, next we have Dyke murdered twenty miles away near Linden, New Jersey. Agent Straker, anything else from the Dyke place, apart from the tyre marks?’

‘Sure not much. Regarding the blade used to finish off the victim, forensics say the body wounds and the slash across the throat are consistent with a steak knife.’

‘Okay right,’ Mortimer said, leaning forward, ‘Religious fanaticism? Or who else would have motives? Is the Captor Jewish? Or let’s say pretends he’s a Jew putting us off the scent? This clinical nature, leaving no traces, reminds me of the Beltway killer.’

The Chief went on and told them about his conversation with the Archbishop the previous night. ‘I’ve fingers crossed Herd won’t stir things up too much. He’s old school, I guess. Let’s hope he buys us some time. The media is becoming excited about this. I’ll have to give a press release later about this mess. Let’s hope the Mass goes off without a problem. Mikaela, any known profiles stand out?’

‘CIA and NSA have been researching up on this as well. A few would be leads have been voiced. Best we have at this early stage is Walter Truman only out a couple of months from jail. He has those worldly views of himself. Sure it could also be any number of religious nuts sir, as 9/11 stirred things here in America. There’s one and a half million Jews in New York at the last count and they’ve also suffered oppression by Christians over the centuries. We’ve contacted Mental Hospitals around the State and are liaising with them about recent releases. The suspect list at this time is quite long sir,’ Mikaela said, almost apologetically. ‘Basically this person has a set against religion, perhaps he was abused as a child or someone close to him suffered at the hands of the Church.’

‘Okay have someone track Truman, see if he has been up to anything. Anything else?’

‘Not as yet sir’

‘Thank you, Agent Straker. You and Wildman go to the cathedral later, try get a handle on things. Check for anything suspicious. I’ll have local police search around the place, in case he’s left any surprises. The Mass is only on the radio, so you never know he may even want a front row seat. Wildman, organise a camera in the Church. Fox can view it from the van.’ He paused looking at the other agents around the table. ‘I’ve a feeling things are just heating up. So we better be ready.’

Render and the moon

Tucson had had many women friends before falling for Natalie, all down to a natural gift of not putting his foot in things, instinctively knowing the better course to take in dating situations. As a result, he knew well many situations had taken place in women's bedrooms instead of on doorsteps.

The bygone Tucson would have questioned his logic of taking the three captives, instead maybe carrying out a simpler plan to avoid putting his foot in it. However, this was the new 'Mark Two' Tucson who believed the circumstances he'd created had a captivating lure heightening the media frenzy, and induced by fear in New York. That was the game after

all, grabbing a huge chunk of the spotlight, and serial killers were the number one attention grabbers in the news. Careful not leaving any evidence as he went, Tucson wasn't ashamed to admit, the only person better than a serial killer at covering their tracks, was a paranoid one. Planning his tasks with precision, he hadn't schemed all those long lonely days and nights only to go in like a headless chicken when the fun eventually started.

It was this foresight and planning that brought him to this point here and now; sitting in the cabin, looking out the large window at the cold rippling waters of the lake. Tiny waves slithering sideways eventually lapping across the small shore in the light of the moon high above. Father Render's bound body was lying on the wooden floor beside his chair, carefully positioned, so he too could look up and admire the night sky.

'Have you ever looked at the moon, Do-gooder, and wondered why so many people see it, but never really do?' He glanced down at the priest's face resting against the chair leg; Render's eyes looked up into his, just looking.

Tucson looked away again out the window. 'I thought not. What do you think those huge dark regions on this side of moon are?' Glancing down again at the priest, duct tape still tightly fastened across Render's lips. 'As I thought,' Tucson continued on regardless, 'You don't know. Well you're not alone there. Not many people really notice those dark regions are circular in shape eh? That those huge dark patches were once craters from immense asteroid strikes maybe four billion years ago. The moon's diameter up there is over 2,000 miles and look at the size of those impacts; they must be hundreds of miles across. Probably the same size as those that caused the mass extinctions here.' He looked down again at Render. The priest's eyes were now looking at the moon and stayed looking at it. Tucson wasn't sure if he was actually interested or just avoiding eye contact.

'Anyway some people now suggest. Earth once had a second moon that broke up, and the dark regions are the remnants of those impacts. Impacts so powerful that lava was forced from beneath the moon's surface, filling in the enormous craters with basalt and

raising them into mountainous uplands we see today. So why aren't modern humans inquisitive anymore? No matter, let's shunt you back down to the guys cause tonight I'll be listening to the first instalment of my own series of 'Science now - Religion past' to be aired over the coming weeks. I'm going to liven up Church rhetoric for their Masses, Do-gooder.'

St Patrick's Cathedral, New York, 8th December

Archbishop Len Herd had fretted in his king-size bed all Tuesday night, sleeping only fitfully. He'd phoned the Papal Nuncio's office and was left dangling for thirty minutes, awaiting clarification of acceptable Church protocol on the matter. He was then informed the Papal Nuncio would contact him the following morning.

As a result, Archbishop Herd had waited all morning for the Papal Nuncio's call. Herd always thought of Mass as his true calling in life, once elevated in the pulpit his adoration took over. As an Archbishop, he took to conveying more thought-provoking ideas, as his role allowed. Sermons were his chance to influence the minds of his listening churchgoers.

But his sermon on this important feast day was now altered. He had thought of speaking about Mary and Joseph's journey to register for the census at the time of Christ's birth. Herd knew this was questioned by historical scholars. Why people travelled in those times to register for censuses? Thinking this a chaotic way to count a nation's citizens, however, his belief overthrew those sceptic's misgivings. He was going to recount in glorifying manner his account of their journey and give small passing attention to this Captor's demand.

Hours before the feast day's evening Mass was set to begin, the Archbishop saw there was more activity, more comings and goings at the cathedral than normal. Media cameramen and soundmen traipsed around inside the cathedral three hours prior to the service. Reporters did their little cameos from the entrance of the cathedral. He was phoned several times for interviews and was disgusted by the whole paparazzi thing and ended up taking the rectory's phone off the hook.

It was now time for the feast day's main service, the expansive cathedral was crammed with people. The Archbishop ceremoniously paraded onto the altar with Father Donato and Father Fairchild trailing behind either side of him. Three altar boys spaced out behind them again. He could see the cathedral's front rows taken up by reporters, alongside their cameras and tripods. A buzz of hushed voices and sounds, greeted his arrival, only from those front pews it seemed. What Herd didn't see was the disgruntled faces of the ever faithful behind those pews, who had lost their usual front row billing.

The FBI was due to do a press release later and appeal for witnesses. Herd was aware Chief Mortimer had many agents observing the congregation in case the Captor wanted a cathedral view of proceedings. The ageing Archbishop walked up slowly and ceremoniously towards the microphone positioned at the front of the impressive altar. His long robe flowing gracefully, highlighting his measured footsteps. The reporters in the front pews quietening in anticipation, cameras stopped flashing. The cathedral descended into the revered quietness it demanded.

Father Donato quickened his stride, passing the Archbishop to stand at the microphone. 'There is now a slight change to tonight's proceedings as Archbishop Herd is unwell with laryngitis. He will be in attendance beside the altar throughout Mass and will be administering Holy Communion. I will now say Mass on this holiest of days; the feast of the Immaculate Conception.' Then Father Donato solemnly walked over to the altar, making the ceremonial adjustments before he began.

There was a muted buzz around the congregation packed into the vast cathedral, hearing of the Archbishop's illness. The rear entrance, way back down the central nave was jammed full of late arrivals.

Meanwhile the Archbishop acknowledged the murmurs from the crowd with a wave of his arm and a smile. Then he walked slowly to the side, adjusting his garments before slowly seating himself in the large wooden ceremonial chair near the altar as the Mass commenced. He was soon irritated by the front row reporter's lack of interest and respect for the early proceedings. Watching them reaching over each other, mentioning something or relaying a joke, whispered into the ear of a smiling face.

Herd had been contacted by the Papal Nuncio to the United States thirty minutes beforehand. Normally he would celebrate Mass on the more important feast days at the cathedral. However, its context had changed with the hostage situation. He'd been told in

no uncertain terms he was not to say the Mass. The strength of the sermon would not carry the weight if said by Father Donato. That was the actual reason he was sitting this one out.

Father Giovanni Donato was an accomplished public speaker and an excellent addition to St Patrick's Cathedral. 'I realise this service today on the feast day of the Immaculate Conception has taken on a somewhat different meaning in light of the recent hijacking of three notable citizens of New York, now held hostage. However, we must continue in the spirit of which Mass should be celebrated.' He paused, looking down pointedly at some reporters, not settled yet. The seated Archbishop had forewarned Father Donato about them. His gaze got the desired reaction. The reporters not wanting to be singled out were cowed into silence and respect; similar to the front row of a stand-up comics show, all futilely shoving their bolted-down-seats backwards, fearing he'd pick on them.

After some minutes the sermon for the day came, catching many of the reporters napping, not used to the order of proceedings. 'The Bible states The Creation happened over seven days to make the Earth we live upon...' He paused again, sounds coming from the reporter's voices and some scrambling for their pens, disrupting the priest. 'That God created the Earth, and that men were to be the Earth's protectors and caretakers. Man has inherited the Earth the Bible says. It is times such as now, when climate change is escalating, caused by man's input into the carbon cycle that we have to look after that inheritance. It is now known that man places chemicals into our atmosphere up to seven times more than all the erupting volcanoes on Earth each year.

'This message today is stated for all men and our government to listen. It is said in the psalms God made the Earth for the sons of men. So from this it is obvious we have the task of looking after the Earth for future generations and all creatures on it.' Father Donato paused, so reflection on his words could opportune, setting himself for his next piece.

There wasn't a whisper in the congregation. The only sound a crying baby way off at the rear, that itself even sounded quiet so far away in the vast open spaces of the cathedral.

'The Church's Hierarchy spoke in 2005, stating the first eleven chapters in the book of Genesis are now not to be taken as fact, that the Bible's account of Earth's creation is now an allegory. As are Noah's Ark and Adam and Eve allegories. Up to a few years ago Creationism was being taught in certain English schools. However, the church does not advocate creation as stated in the Bible any more. It should be taken I believe that these stories were designed to teach man to ponder the world around him and learn from them.'

'It is well known now the word 'Yom' in Jewish texts does not literally have to mean one twenty-four-hour period. A Yom can also be taken to mean twelve hours or a thousand years or other lengths of time. It is this latter meaning the church has long since believed to be the true time span of the age of the Earth. Some believe God created the Earth on the first day and there was then an eternity before the second day. So now we are encouraged to look back with the aid of science, so as to find in the past his intelligent design and to help us protect the Earth for the future. Science found the Earth is aged at about five billion years. This alone does it not show the scope of God and that the church asks everyone to endeavour more conscientiously regarding our Earth. Though prayer and learning we can understand our world better.'

After the priest had ended the sermon there were mumblings from the front rows, carrying on even as Father Donato continued on with the service. Three photographers had stood up taking photographs which made the Archbishop's face turn red in annoyance.

Holiday Heaven

Some years back

One September some years ago, Natalie and John Tucson brought their young kids to Israel. It was Remy's first airplane flight. Natalie's mother had told them they were booking a tour of Israel, seeing all those mystical and hallowed places mentioned in the Bible. Her parents were genuine Episcopal Christians and had always intended to visit the Holy Land. Her father, Ben, was not the typical father-in-law. Tucson was twelve years older than Natalie and Ben was a young father, making the two more like friends back then. Her mum, Paula, promised to look after the kids if they'd come along. It was too good an offer to turn down as their older kids Samantha and Stephen loved their granny.

Tucson's own parents had passed away in their late seventies and all happening within eight months of each other, as is often the case. What was unusual was his parents

separated ten years after Tucson, their only child, had left home for work at Connecticut University.

He knew his kind and compassionate wife saw herself as a Christian role model and realised his own Catholic upbringing did him no harm. He respected and admired her continued belief in religion, knowing it would give Samantha, Stephen and Remy solid bases for morals and altruism and never ever thought to contradict her when she spoke of the Bible's teachings to the children.

He looked forward to sightseeing in Israel visiting places mentioned in the Bible. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem built over the very cave where Jesus was born all those years ago, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Jesus was brought after his crucifixion. The Museum of the Book of the Shrine in Jerusalem was another on their 'to do' list.

While there, Tucson had been fascinated by the guided tour of the Caves near Qumran where the Dead Sea scrolls had been discovered in the 1940's, the scrolls having remained hidden from the world since 70 AD. Tucson and Natalie entered one of the caves in the white rock face using a long rickety ladder supplied by their local guides. Samantha was all the time crying down below on the ground, because she wasn't allowed up it. Ben was glad of his chance to see into the caves when her parents finally descended to the ground, and to be away from Sam's wailings.

They learned these scrolls dated back before 300 BC, authenticating later Old Testament manuscripts translated around 1000 AD. Tucson intrigued by the history of the Qumran region, couldn't help feeling nearer to God. A God embedded in every part of the culture and countryside in the Holy Land. Over eight hundred scrolls of Old Testament scripts and local laws were placed in these caves by the Essene Jewish Sect. Hiding away their religious library from invading Roman armies sent to put down Jewish uprisings. The now famous Copper Scroll, listing places where ancient temple treasures are buried, was

found in those caves, bestowing on the guided tours pilgrims, a sense of the purported wealth of the ancient Jewish culture. Tucson realised, when at the caves, just how tough life must have been for those bygone inhabitants of Qumran, continually oppressed and preyed upon by the once mighty Roman Empire. That was the day before tragedy struck.